



UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID
FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA

TESIS DOCTORAL

ALT [C]LIT:

The Poetics of Millennial Cyberculture in the USA

Vanesa Menéndez Cuesta

Directora de la Tesis Doctoral:
Prof. Dra. Julia Salmerón

Madrid, 2020

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Tesis presentada por Vanesa Menéndez Cuesta

Licenciada en Filología Inglesa
para la obtención del grado de Doctora

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“So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say.”

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

“For me, the artist simply means one who can transform ordinary life into a beautiful creation with his craft. But I did not mean creation strictly applied only to the arts, I meant creation in life, the creation of a child, a garden, a home, a dress. I was referring to creativity in all its aspects. Not only the actual products of art, but the faculty for healing, consoling, raising the level of life, transforming it by our own efforts. I was talking about the creative will, our salvation.”

— Anaïs Nin, “On Truth and Reality,” from *In Favor of the Sensitive Man and Other Essays*.

“Sure, I’m dramatic and sloppily semi-cynical and semi-sentimental. But, in leisure years I could grow and choose my way. Now I am living on the edge. We all are on the brink, and it takes a lot of nerve, a lot of energy, to teeter on the edge, looking over, looking down into the windy blackness and not being quite able to make out, through the yellow, stinking mist, just what lies below in the slime, in the oozing, vomit-streaked slime; and so I could go on, my thoughts, writing much, trying to find the core, the meaning for myself.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*.

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Ana from high school, Yolanda from our exchange trip in France, and Helena from our undergraduate years; let's keep making it until we all go grey. To my New York friends, Eana, David, Camila, Cristina, Francisco, and to the all great memories we made there; an special mention to my adored chamo Alejandro, you reminded me how to love literature and art again with your wisdom, and to keep growing as the woman you know I am and admire me for. And to my dearest partner, my lover, the man who showed me what true love and mutual understanding mean and look like, Hinata, I can not wait to see what the future will hold for us together.

Introduction

In 1991, the feminist collective of artists VNS Matrix stated in The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century that “the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix”. By making this statement at the start of the 1990s, the collective claimed that technology, in particular that one related to simulation, the digital and the virtual, offered women a new arena to reinvent themselves in different ways: that the post-human started to become a possible and alternative form of liberation from the postmodern crisis in order to rewrite not only what a human was meant to be, but also to reinvent gender through the endless, fruitful online grounds for imaginative proliferation(s). Rapid changes followed the next two decades, as fast as the speed of a virus crossing space and time to infect a new computing system: lurking into our daily lives, reconfiguring our routines, sneaking throughout our computer screens, blinding us with all its splendorous hyper(un)reality, fascinating us with their endless scrolling feeds that erase the boundaries between reality and the virtual.

Little they knew that twenty-three years later, in 2014, Emma Rae would employ the abbreviation “[C]lit” in order to label a group of female writers who belonged to a larger community of artists formerly known as the Alt Lit. Furthermore, the word “click” sounds similar to “clit,” since the sounds /k/ (velar) and /t/ (alveolar) are voiceless plosives whose places of articulation are produced by placing the tongue at the soft palate, right before the beginning of the throat (velar), and at the alveolar ridge, right behind the teeth (alveolar). This slight difference makes the combination of both words a witty alliteration that fuses both terms as if they were the same: [C]lit simultaneously refers to ‘[c]lick,’ ‘[c]litoris,’ and ‘[c]literature.’ The omission or presence of the [C] makes the difference between ‘click’ and ‘lick’, ‘literature’ and ‘cliterature’, this last one stands as a term used during the 1970s to refer, pejoratively, to women’s literary production. But also, the [C] on its own can stand for many other meanings: the command [Ctrl + C] for copying; © as the copyright symbol; [C] of computer, cyborg, culture, core (understood as the matrix that VNS group referred to in their manifesto), connect(ivity) ... The suggestive nature of this letter read in this digital context can be evocatively endless, contributing to the richness of variety of meanings that this thesis is prone to imply. It seems by these recreations that ‘click(ing) my clit’ is the motto behind the Alt [C]Lit abbreviated acronym, by reclaiming visibility to a part of the female anatomy that has been deliberately censored, omitted and even erased from the cultural memory of human (his)tory, due to the patriarchal and systematic oppression of women in most parts of the world. Originally, the word ‘click’ meant low snapping sound, that reminds one of the

subtle crackling noise the mouse of the computer makes when one selects something in their screens. Equally, the ‘clit(oris)’ produces orgasmic sharp noises once it is found and touched appropriately. Is it now the time to reclaim the [c]literature through the inclusion of Alt [C]Lit authors as part of a new paradigm of women’s writing? Is Alt [C]Lit the definite poetic embodiment where women’s agency over their bodies and sexualities is openly, publicly, and explicitly spoken and represented, without remorse or shame?

The present thesis, “Alt [C]Lit: The Poetics of Millennial Cyberculture in the USA”, explores the cultural and artistic genealogies of literature and cyberfeminism, in order to explain the paradoxical position of Millennial youth as (dis)connected to the luring ghostly-bright screens, within the loneliness of their inhabited rooms, alienated from urban societ(ies), trapped inside the World Wide Web. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to identify in which manners Alt [C]Lit constitutes an innovative, literary and alternative generation of young authors who are appropriating daily online writing practices and virtual spaces to make their voices heard. They do so as female creators in the contemporary literary scene through experimentation, a feminist political position and making visible topics that affect the Millennial generation. To prove this hypothesis, I would like to establish a series of genealogies within the literary, social, cultural, and economic framework from which the Millennial generation results. The poets I selected, Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete, and Gonzalez, are US natives who mostly live in the New York and Los Angeles areas, were born between the early 1980s and the early 1990s, and whose mostly known literary production has been produced between 2010 and 2016.

As a researcher, I conceive this literary movement as a Generation since their works share a series of common themes, characteristic and recurrent, which are also associated to what sociologists have identified as the Generation Y or Millennials. I want to continue applying this notion of generation in order to justify why I “rescue” my choice of authors from the Alt Lit community and why I claim they constitute a new group. I believe so since this five poets share a common vision of what it means creating and producing literature. Their poetry originates from a commonly lived-experience through a series of events that have distinctively marked this generational group of poets born in the US between the early 1980s and the early 2000s. Some of these events are: the financial crisis of 2007-2008, the Great Recession, the democratization of the use of the Internet, the proliferation of new social media, and the mass consumption of smartphones and personal computers as technological advances that have radically changed societal relations. Therefore, the nature of this work can be framed inside the study of sociocultural parameters that

employs cultural history procedures of analysis, and whose main material means is literature, and more concretely, poetry, in order to describe more widely a generational phenomenon and context. The thesis has been structured considering that Alt [C]Lit poetry is relatively an unknown phenomenon, especially within the academic sphere. After a thorough research, I found that in order to present my findings, I had to consider the little, even non-existent, previous knowledge of the authors presented. Also, and to argue my consideration that Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete and Gonzalez are part of the same group of artists (what I call a Millennial literary generation of female authors), I have divided this work in chapters that identify five big topic-clusters. These are: a literary and historical background; the genealogies of women's digital writing; the notions of loneliness and depression in Millennial poets; women's sexuality and its representation in new digital media; and finally the Madonna-Whore complex and sexual violence in women's poetry.

In Chapter One 'What is Alt Lit?' I discuss how the Alt Lit community can be framed inside the history of contemporary literature. In the midst of a crisis in the field of humanistic epistemologies, digital studies have emerged as a response to analyze and theorize about the impact of technology and, particularly, the advances of virtual reality and the role of online media have in society and in our daily lives. Alt Lit literature comes at the liminal juncture between the digital, or electronic, literature and the avant-garde literary scene in which the Internet and a digitalized readership represent a new transition towards new modes of creation and publication outside the traditional mainstream cultural channels. From its random naming by an anonymous Internet user, who created the Alt Lit Gossip Tumblr and Twitter accounts in 2011, the Alt Lit community emerged as a cultural movement reacting against the literary works produced during the 1990s and early 2000s. Their core values orbit towards collective culture and the interactivity offered by digital networking platforms, that also allows them for self-publishing and self-promotion. In combination with the development of an Internet language, constituted by emoticons and memes, this dynamic reinforces an apparently immature and carefree approach to diverse topics, such as drug use, sex and a sense of alienation expressed through a nihilist and decadent lens.

In Chapter Two 'The (voi)ces of a Girl-eration: (@)LiVe of Alt [C]Lit writing,' I discuss the implications of hyper-communication and Alt [C]Lit's writing as parallel phenomena that can be traced throughout universal women's literary history. Dating back to the Ancient times of Goddesses and the tasks of spinning, weaving, embroidering, patch-working and quilting, these traditional media that represent women's crafting were, and are still, well-known forms both of storytelling and of the transmission of information and cultural heritage. Nowadays, the flow of information keeps reminding one of this flow of interconnected laces: producing while consuming,

what Zafra calls prosuming, or oversharing through Twitter while hiding and isolating ourselves in the anonymity of our bedrooms. Embedded in digital culture, women's writing practices have evolved into a public broadcasting platform through which they are openly allowed to expose their intimacies through the illusory safety of their computer screens, and sometimes, the anonymity provided by an avatar and online persona. By establishing a genealogy of interwoven networks between past and present, Alt [C]Lit poets and writers, such as Mira Gonzalez, Melissa Broder, Gabby Bess, Ana Carrete, , Sarah Jean Alexander, and others like Megan Boyle, become the very future of text-making and other artistic creations. Just like mechanical looms and punched cards helped weavers to string threads together, typing machines in the twentieth century and computers nowadays go a step further in connecting more than words: computing systems also establish networks between writers and users that, in return, keep them connected in a boundless web. The World Wide Web, better known as the Internet, keeps its prey, like a gigantic spider. This results in an over-production of ephemeral textual works which marks the importance of online social performativity conditions in these authors' works and lives as Millennial women.

In Chapter Three 'LØnely-Narcissist S0vl(s): the Instant-gram(\$) of Self(ie)-reparation,' I discuss how radical individualism and the digital have influenced the way Millennials have been configured as a generation conformed by a unified mass of individuals. The act of writing, performed through the Internet and other social media, becomes the epitome of what joins social connectivity and loneliness: a Millennial youth compulsively typing and chatting through personal computers and cell phones inside the safe and comfortable space of a room. Despite the new improvements made by newer technologies for bringing us together, the truth is that people miss out an intimate reciprocity in their relationships which the virtual is unable to bring in. This social anxiety has been portrayed by Alt [C]Lit poets such as Sarah Jean Alexander, who writes about existential weariness and digital isolation, and Mira Gonzalez, who explores social awkwardness and detachment as an inability to connect with others. On the other hand, in a context where happiness and general wellness is promoted through various social media platforms, such as Instagram or YouTube, I will analyze how this affects emotional stability and even potentially encourages an increase in the development of some psychological disorders such as anxiety, paranoia and depression. Following Klein's concept of introjection from her Object Relation Theory, I identify the different ways each Alt [C]Lit poet uses this process as means of alleviating this sense of loneliness: for Alexander and Carrete, food ingestion becomes a form of bonding virtually with others, whereas for Broder and Gonzalez it is related to struggling with body dysmorphia. In the terms of prescription drugs' usage, both Bess and Gonzalez employ them as a

way for dealing with dissociation and paranoia once depressive states and anxiety overcomes their existential dread.

In Chapter Four 'Inf0rm@tic\$ & D0mi(m)atriX: I[y]es + intimac(ies) 3xposs3d,' I discuss the condition of the hypermodern individual under technological dominion. I argue that it is characterized by a general precariousness and a constant cyclic loop of consumption and productivity, that exhausts both the body and stimulates the anxious mind. Under the constant surveillance imposed by social media trends, people's anxiety for optimal performance results from a longing to be seen in order to exist: a combination between the Sibila's tyranny of visibility and Zafra's ocularcentrism and the proliferation of the industries centered on the overproduction of multiple images of the "I": the selfie culture, which implies more than narcissistic images overpopulating the Internet sphere. Inside the connected room(s) of our megalopolises, the new hikikomoris find refuge outside the frenzy of the non-places, which constantly puts the body into a still movement through various means of transport, used for dissociating one's body from its surroundings. The connected room, understood as the nexus between the virtual and the real, and mediated through the computer screen as the quintessential window, also becomes a site for providing an intimacy, that of social distancing and out of reach and touch, for those who lack it in the overcrowded urban spaces. On the other hand, however, it is also a site for the potential proliferation of new and alternative subjectivities, those ones created online. These are explored by Broder and Bess in order to challenge either the dread of one's own corporeal obsolescence or as a break-out from reality by means of creating unstable social bonds. In terms of analyzing how affectivity and body image affects young women's identities, sexuality must be taken into account: all five poets, Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete and Gonzalez ,have actively displayed on their own visions about their sexuality and affective interactions through their poems. Alternative representations of female genitalia and masturbation from a female perspective establish new ways for re-thinking and re-claiming empowerment, resilience, and self-love from a personal to a political position: if texting configures a new writing performance, then clicking embodies a new form for assertively exploring self-pleasure for many women around the world.

And finally, in Chapter Five 'Between Danger(s) and Pleasure(s): The Poly-morf(l)vx Cyber-Slut,' I discuss how the dichotomies presented by the opposing figures of the Virgin and the Whore are translated into modern terms as the Slut and the Prude. These ambivalent and antagonistic stereotypes constrain women's sexual liberties and assertiveness and make them more prone to suffer violence and abuse. By equating enjoying pleasure to displaying overt indecency, women become conditioned to behave in a certain manner. Thus, the female body becomes policed

and controlled by other external social forces who use sexual repression in order to take advantage of women's reproductive means under the heterosexual imperative of marriage and romantic love. Those women who dare to remain outside this command fall under the category of bad women, and therefore, grow to be ostracized in shame and self-repression. By reclaiming the term slut, many Alt [C]Lit poets, as well as many other contemporary artists in the last two decades, have brought slut-shaming into the political arena, and pointed out how language contributes to encourage, and even justify, sexual violence actively. Bess and Carrete explore the empowerment of transgression and abjection through the limits of marginality, desire and pleasure as cam girl(s). By simulating sexual encounters, these new forms of virtually mediated interactions have integrated the voyeuristic performance of the virtual slut and the online girlfriend experience while protecting themselves from the potential dangers associated to the materiality of sex work. The slut becomes the juncture between being a political category for unity and sorority, as movements such as #slutwalk and #metoo asks for the effective legal measures and governmental material protection for vulnerable and potential victims. Whereas the conservative trends related to the Purity Myth and the promotion of sexual abstinence jeopardizes women's rights and progression in society, the implications of such tensions are illustrated in Bess, Border and Gonzalez's depiction of sexual violence and its psychological implications in their poems.

As it can be easily noticed, the language used to entitle the different chapters may seem encrypted, almost unreadable for those who are not accustomed to online language, symbols and typographies. These titles are meant to be read in different ways, depending on the way the reader understands them first. Apart from [C] that I have explained above, I would like to comment on the symbolism of the rest of them, as well as on the way they should be read:

'@', known as the 'at sign', is broadly used in email addresses and for introducing Twitter user's name. In the title of the sections it must be read as an 'a' but in other contexts it may be used at the end of gendered words to mark them as gender neutral

'(Y)' is usually read as a 'i' or as a 'y', and it must be understood as a reference to the alternative name for Millennials, known as 'Generation Y', and as an abbreviation for the interrogative 'why'

'(v)' can be read as 'v', 'u' or 'w'. It recalls the inverted triangular shape of the vulva; it is a symbol for feminism and I use it to explicitly state the gendered politics of this thesis

'(\$)' stands for both the letter 's' and the dollar symbol suggesting the neoliberal politics that are embedded in the digitalization and monetization of digital culture

‘(0)’ is another allusion to femininity as Sadie Plant states in *Zeros and Ones*, (I shall comment this later in this thesis). It also substitutes the traditional ‘o’ letter for visual symbolism rather than for phonetical analogy

‘Ø’, the vowel and letter mostly used in Scandinavian languages; similarly to (0) it can also be read as ‘o’ and interpreted visually as a slashed ‘o’, that is, as the negation of the feminine symbol standing for the female genitalia

‘(3)’ must be read as an inverted ‘e’ that follows the numerical visuals that characterize computing language and coding

Both the [] and () have a similar function that serves for adding extra information or complementing the meaning of words which can be read in two different ways by the omission or addition of such set of letters;

Finally, the ‘rrr’ becomes an aesthetic wink to the onomatopoeic growling originally used by underground feminist punk movement riot grrrl.

With the use of these symbols I wanted to generate an alternative combination or placement of letters as an evident influence of computing language in human language. I wanted to show, too, how these evidences are softened, and even apparently mingled in an invisible and subtle manner, with our daily linguistic interactions through written texts. The colloquial register employed by Alt [C]lit poets manifests a larger linguistic turn by which technology shapes the way we speak, and mostly write, as by means of communicating virtually, characterized of a dematerialized bodily presence and the proliferation of disembodied online subjectivities.

In order to navigate these topics, I have selected a series of concepts and theories in order to establish a notional framework through which to analyze and understand the relevance of the Alt [C]lit poetry in relation to larger social and cultural trends at present. I have extensively used Remedios Zafra’s theories about Internet culture and identity by applying the concepts of prosuming, of the connected room, and of ocularcentrism to amplify my literary findings. Also, I have employed Plant’s argumentation of the symbols of ones and zeros, as well as the historical and metaphoric analogies between typing, writing, and weaving as intrinsic parts of women’s crafting and art making. To a lesser extent, but rather recurrently, I also refer to Byung Chul Han’s philosophical and sociological texts about contemporary matters such as hypercommunication, the emptying of the “I”, and the burnout syndrome to analyze certain social features implied in the making of Alt [C]lit literature. I have also used widely Marc Augé’s concept of the non-places to contextualize urban anxieties about displacement and alienation expressed in the architectural and

structures that conform modern cities such as New York or Los Angeles. For my feminist theoretical readings I have applied Andrea Dworkin, Virginie Despentes, Angela Carter and Itziar Ziga to deal with controversial issues about contemporary femininity and sexual emancipation embedded in the Madonna-Whore complex, which is a recurring paradox for all Alt [C]Lit authors. And lastly, I have applied Melanie Klein's theory on integration and introjection to the politics of affectivity and ego projection to analyze diverse forms of consumerism, such as drugs usage, sex and food bonding. Together with other theorists and academic researchers, I have supported my findings about the Alt [C]Lit poetry and art I have selected for illustrating this thesis.

Finally, I would like to propose the following set of questions to see whether a conclusion can be reached by the end of this thesis. These questions aim also to stimulate the inquisitive and critical position of the reader by opening up further discussions and future inquiries about literature, feminism, society and the role of technology nowadays.

Can Alt [C]Lit poetry be considered literature? Can Internet literature be considered a form of art? Why am I choosing women instead of men? Why is it important to consider that the medium of writing and publishing influences and changes the very notion of literature? Why do I consider this group of authors a generation? Which topics or themes configure this generation? Is the notion of generation a valid form to analyze literature? What is literature? Who defines literature?

Chapter 1. What is *Alt Lit*?

In the recent years, the extended use of the Internet in our daily lives, as well as the constant flourishing of new social media platforms, have influenced the way we communicate with each other(s), by expressing our feelings and thoughts in a linguistically different manner, creating new ways of writing about various topics, and by developing innovative and alternative artistic forms. Recently, a new generation of writers, poets and other authors have bloomed from the Internet, who use different platforms such as blogs, videos, chats, Facebook status updates¹, Tweets², online PDFs, folded papers and chapbooks³ (Spilker 2012) in order to present their literary works, which encompass narrative, poetry, and other literary genres.

The multiplicity of media offered by the virtual world has allowed to increase the number of countless authors who are able to publish freely, particularly online. Nevertheless, one of the most well-known and influential group of them is what is known as the *Alt Lit* community, a set of young alternative writers who have become the most outstanding and more clearly defined group in the literary online scene of the last decade in the United States of America. In this introductory chapter, *Alt Lit* is going to be contextualized within the current philosophical, cultural and literary theoretical frames within these geopolitical limits in order to approach them through a historical and critical point of view as both a community and as a literary movement belonging to the New Millennium and the Digital Age.

1.1 The crisis of the Post- Modern Humanities: from Hypermodernism to Digimodernism

Technology is impacting our lives at different and various levels: we cannot conceive our lives without the constant intervention, interaction and usage of various technological devices and other digital media. During the second half of the XX century, diverse cultural, philosophical, historical and artistic theories emerged as an attempt to encompass the current lines of thought and trends that fluctuate within the social in order to describe contemporary human life. After the

¹ **Facebook status** is an update feature which allows users to discuss their thoughts, whereabouts, or important information with their Friends. Source: <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/Facebook-status>

² **Tweet** is a post on Twitter, which originally was a 140-character limit long and was increased to 280 in 2017. Source: <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/tweet>

³ **Chapbook** is a small book or pamphlet containing poems, ballads, stories, or religious tracts. Nowadays is used to refer to short, inexpensive booklets. Source: <http://web.mit.edu/21h.418/www/nhausman/chap1.html>

saturation of Postmodernism's failed attempt to explain this by the end of the 1970s, new philosophical approaches incorporated to their epistemes the importance of technology in the understanding of human life. There is no doubt about the impact of the new technological advances have supposed, and still are supposing, to have a huge impact in the way we conceive, perceive and construct this new stage in history as a result of the *Digital (re)-volution*.

For this reason, I consider that before diving any further into the literary context, I would like to contextualize the epistemological framework within which *Alt Lit* is going to be discussed and analyzed in the following chapters. In this section I present different ways of understanding contemporaneity, or rather, *millenniality*, by proposing a series of terms and epistemological theories which have emerged from recent critical modes of understanding the humanities. In this section, I contextualize the historical momentum in which we are now inscribed: what is this new Millennium about? Many critics have tried to leave behind Postmodernist philosophical parameters in which contemporary cultural and social studies have developed their theoretical frames for an analysis and an understanding of current rapid changes in society. A crisis in the humanities field has resulted from the technological advances derived from economic resources and interests invested in further research in mostly technology and sciences. This fact has also meant to be a turning point for many humanist theorists since the 1980s.

Critics such as Baudrillard have pointed out the relevance of models of reality in order to understand the value of the sign in postmodern societies: the disappearance of 'referentials' and the substitution of the 'signs of the real' by their 'operational double' are still relevant starting points for analyzing how language works in the Information Era. There is no longer a distinction between the boundaries of the real and the imaginary in order to explain the dichotomies of human understanding. In the context of the hyperreal, models are repeated, and difference is understood as a "simulated generation" (Baudrillard 1988, 167). Therefore, hyperreality emerges as a simulated reality that is produced through intermediaries by means of recurrent consumerism, that erases the distinction between fiction and reality, simulacrum and the original, or Baudrillard puts it: "Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum." (Baudrillard 1988, 170) He also makes a clear distinction between representation and simulation as opposites as the key point through which we can understand hyperreality as a mode of understanding a reality. This is acted upon by a constant transformation of the reality itself through processes such as

“deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, deterritorialization” to erase any previous referentiality or “ideal distinction” (Baudrillard 1988, 179) between the real and the simulation.

In the Information Era, these issues are related to the simulated reality that virtuality is offered by new technologies, such as a social media, artificial intelligence, virtual reality and other digital-related gadgets, which easily distort the limits between fiction and reality. In this context, Saphiro argues that the combination of the hyper-real and speed, which are Postmodernist technologies applied to current computational devices, allows us to partially foresee the future through the paradox of an overlapping presence of the past and the future: “In hyper-modernism, all of these machines which alter space-time are replaced by the universal machine of the computer. Analog expressive media such as images or music all get transfigured by their representation in digital code and algorithms.” (Saphiro 24th March 2016, *Alan Saphiro*) In this sense, the obsolete linear narrative of history must be rethought in new terms by creating a new epistemology that would include computational, and in particular, multimedia models of perception, which are currently dominating and influencing on our individual and social experiences and forms of understanding.

For this same reason, literary theorist Mikhail Epstein claimed that the current ‘crisis of the humanities’ resulted from the Postmodernist position of constant ‘suspicion’ and mistrust about reality and absolute truths. In *The Transformative Humanities: A Manifesto* (2012), he describes how the world is being transformed by post-industrial technologies that have affected the configuration of the economy’s productivity “... by producing ideas and images, not things, and by operating with words, symbols, and numbers, not with the material objects.” (Epstein 2012, 4) Through the dematerialization of a big part of the consumer’s goods in current industries, which are mostly information and innovations of previous products, the interest of humanities must reflect on these changes and incorporate the impact of these new technologies of digital information onto humanistic knowledge. He suggests that this would be helpful in order to rethink what humanity is nowadays, and to help understand the transformations which are occurring, instead of isolating their objects of study in a loop of ‘self-reflectiveness’ that is driving the whole field of the humanities towards uncreative and unproductive projects.

In his Thesis, Epstein also defends the fact that we cannot understand the human without the technological, hence we cannot comprehend scientific knowledge without understanding the human side that is involved in it (Epstein 2012, 8) The reason why is because he considers that most lines

of humanist research are obsolete ones, and even counter-productive for the survival, in terms of funding coming from research centres and other institutions, and the relevance of the humanist vision for understanding the current issues that contemporary culture and society are the most concerned about (Epstein 2012, 2-3) Hence, he proposes a new paradigm of epistemological ‘inventions’ is because he considers that by potentially incorporating both areas of knowledge, the humanities will be able to produce more productive and pragmatic outcomes, more adapted to comprehend the current times, by applying Bakhtin’s idea of cultural “co-creativity”: this is known as the ‘transhumanities.’ This new mode of thinking can be understood as a kind of ‘transmodernism’ that is mainly characterized by how the different ‘modes of cognitive advancement’ belong to the combination of the fields of the sciences and the humanities, which are mutually connected through “discovery,” “invention,” and “inventorship.” (Epstein 2012, 14) Epstein thinks that these new practices would inject new ways of productivity for the creation of new cultural paradigms that would explain and describe the rapid changes that society are facing today due to the incorporation of diverse technology that is available in people’s daily lives. By interrogating about how this is affecting what is meant to be human these days and in the near future, Epstein proposes “transhumanism” as an attempt to renovate the current interests of humanities to become more pro-active by contributing actively, rather than passively, to the development of new discourses that are shaping human and technological evolution:

Both manifesto and futurologism are not constative, but performative types of discourse: they do not describe what already exists but attempt to implement the future through the very act of its manifestation (...) Their realities coincide with the spheres of their intentions, desires, expectations, and possibilities. The entire field of the transhumanities is a self-projection of the human species and thus encourages a projective type of discourse (Epstein 2012, 19)

Another important feature that characterizes this crisis is what Gans defines as ‘victimary resentment:’ how Postmodernism embraced castrating trauma as a reaction towards the horrors resulting from the WWII and the outcomes of other tragic events such as Hiroshima and Auschwitz. These events entailed breaking points and the start of a generalized crisis of hegemonic values during the second half of the XX century. A contemporary revival of this ‘victimary revelation’ can be found in the resentment originated by social critical events, such as the systemic racism against the African-American community and the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement, and the prevalence of sexual violence and the *#MeToo* movement. Both of them are social-justice movements, and have been popularized through the use of a hashtag⁴ as a tool for spreading social awareness in the last

⁴ **Hashtag** is a tag used to categorize post son Twitter according to certain topics which generally trendy. Source: <https://whatis.techtarget.com/search/query?q=hashtag>

years. Gans explains in his article *The Post-Millennial Age* (Gans 3rd June 2000, *Chronicles of Love & Resentment*) that the characteristic of the ‘distrust of “the subject” and of “master narratives”’ have resulted into an attempt to compensate through “... decolonization, the civil-rights movement, feminism, gay liberation, etc ...” to those who have been historically, socially and culturally oppressed by ‘hegemonic structures’ and by institutionally imposed patterns of behavior.

These alternative narratives have tried to provide a certain sense of liberation that, according to Gans, is “still unresolved” in most cases, showing up the tensions that characterizes this millennium: for him, the Post-modernist nihilistic, “self-denying iron(ic)” attitude arises from the failure of utopias, including socialism, to repair the past and to heal the present as a constant characteristic of the Postwar Era. He also complains about the superficial impact that these ‘victimary revelations’ has on current societies, which lack the transformational impact, as the “defining the goal of our moral existence,” at the expense of turning them into a mere entertainment of ‘spiritual pornography.’ This can be seen as the failure of Post-modernism to move forward and to create new epistemes through which society can be transformed by leaving behind the emotional baggage of the past, which societies still carry into the New Millennium in the form of social or community trauma, unable to confront the challenging, paradoxical and transformational powers that technology and digital realities have for such purpose.

Returning to Epstein’s proposal for reinventing the Humanities, Kirby also agrees on changing the non-productive model of Postmodernist ‘*ironic self-awareness*’, in which philosophical meaning and knowledge are totally elusive (Kirby 2006) For him, the switch from the fetishization of the author to the fetishization of the reader, this last one considered to be partly a producer of the text, outcomes from various factors, including that of the “banality and vacuity” of contemporary culture and its “democratization.” Therefore, culture has switched its focus towards the illusory guessing spectacle in which the reader constantly questions whether what (s)he is perceiving, generally visually, is real or fictional, and the “illusion of participation,” that is the precursor of the fallacy of “interactivity” offered by the Internet: “This is a far more intense engagement with the cultural process than anything literature can offer, and gives the undeniable sense (or illusion) of the individual controlling, managing, running, making up his/her involvement with the cultural product.” (Kirby 2006, *Philosophy Now: a magazine of ideas*) Hence, the texts produced in this context are characterized by its “hyper-ephemerality” (who hasn’t encountered broken links to webpages which once we used to have total accessed to?) and “instability” (links, blogs, webpages, videos quickly appear, and disappeared once the server has expired or the site has

been deliberately and/or unexpectedly deleted by its creator). Later on, Kirby re-labels this term of 'pseudo-modernism' for the one of 'digimodernism,' a concept that has been later developed in further detail in his book *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (2009), and which was previously outlined in his article of 2006 as follows:

In place of the neurosis of modernism and the narcissism of postmodernism, pseudo-modernism *takes the world away*, by creating a new weightless nowhere of silent autism. You click, you punch the keys, you are 'involved', engulfed, deciding. You are the text, there is no-one else, no 'author'; there is nowhere else, no other time or place. You are free: you are the text: the text is superseded. (Kirby 2006, *Philosophy Now: a magazine of ideas*)

1.2. Electronic Literature: the death of literature and the beginning of hypertextuality

In a new era, radically marked by the influence of new technological media, especially that of the Internet, the emergence of new textual forms is transforming, and even challenging, the preconceived ideas which were established about the literary cannon and its conventional structures, including the creation of new hypertextual paradigms. This was perfectly predicted by Marshall McLuhan in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, as it follows:

For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. [...] This fact merely underlines the point that "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. [...] Indeed, it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium. (MacLuhan 1965, 8-9)

MacLuhan's concept of media considering that the manner in which the "medium" influences the "message" that attempts to transmit becomes indistinguishable from it: in other words, both the "medium" and the "message" go hand in hand as a single entity that mutually shapes and conforms each other. One of the most representative attempts made for incorporating the new digital and other electronic media to the arts is what is known as 'Electronic literature', literally. Electronic literature can be defined as the "first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer" (Hayles 2010, 3), which radically opposes to the idea of using the digital medium in order to produce a final print object in the traditional form of a book with paper pages. Hence, one has to realize, as Hekman and O'Sullivan pointed out in *Electronic Literature: Contexts and Poetics* that there is a clear distinction between "digitalized

literature” and “digital literature;” terms which can be easily interchanged and mistaken whereas neither of them should be used lightly in order to describe any literary work produced via computers nowadays:

While the aesthetics of electronic literature should not be reduced to text on a screen, a piece of digitized print literature could incorporate some innovation that allows us to classify the work, in some respect, as born-digital. What we can gather from classifying works is that the practice of digitizing print literature *in itself* does not constitute electronic literature and that print literature can be reimagined through computation. (Heckman & O’Sullivan 2018, *Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology*)

Any criticism concerning Electronic literature must be done by taking into account this distinction in order to classify it as a contemporary literary work that may have been influenced by electronic aesthetics and computational innovations that also interfere in how language is presented, known as digital paratextuality. According to Bootz, digital literature is characterized by three basic dimensions, to say “hypertext,” “algorithmic generation,” and “animation.” He also argues that the interaction and interdependence between the physical format of the computer and its computation programming are essential for the workings of Electronic literature:

[...] most pure digital works contain programmed aesthetic forms inscribed inside *dual signs* having one part in the program and another on screen. In order to be complete, one must take into account that these dual signs are necessarily joined with signals (resulting from the treatment of the program by computers) that only exist while running. Even if these signals are not a sign because they cannot be received by a human receptor, they are a part of the work. (Bootz 2011, 2)

One of the most notorious attempts to be ever made for creating literary content in combination with the hypertextual form was made by pioneer poet Judy Malloy in *Uncle Roger*⁵ (1986), which is an on-going project produced and displayed online which offers the reader the possibility of creating new narratives through interactive choices, so that each of the resulting stories differs from one’s own personal reading. The critics’ acclaim that received this innovative piece of literature opened up the doors for other authors who, throughout the following decades, continue experimenting, developing and innovating in this new field originated from the incorporation of new media to the textuality of literature, now known as ‘Electronic Literature’ or ‘Digital Literature.’ Other relevant examples worth mentioning of this new kind of literature are hypermedia novel *Uncle Buddy’s Phantom Funhouse*⁶ (1993) by John McDaid, electronic fiction *Patchwork*

⁵ Link reference for **Judy Malloy’s *Uncle Roger***: <http://collection.eliterature.org/3/works/uncle-roger/>

⁶Link reference for **John McDaid’s *Uncle Buddy’s Phantom Funhouse***: <https://archive.org/details/unclebuddy>

*Girl*⁷ (1995) by Shelley Jackson, or the more recent hypertext novel *We Descend*⁸ (2011) by Bill Bly.

The institutionalization of Electronic Literature came through the foundation of the *Electronic Literature Organization*⁹ by Scott Rettberg, Robert Coover, and Jeff Ballowe in Chicago in 1999, who are writers and scholars interested in promoting and facilitating equal access to this new literary field to both authors and readers. Their main activities include organizing international conferences, readings and symposia, the publication of book series, listing electronic works and authors, editing anthologies, collecting and archiving noteworthy and provocative works, and providing creative and scholarly awards inside the context of digital literature and studies. In 2017, the organization moved its headquarters to Washington State University in Vancouver, Canada. The existence of this academic organization proves the relevance of Electronic Literature for the scholarship as a subject of interest to study and to research in further detail within the field of humanities and literary studies nowadays and in the coming years.

Considering this context, can we label *Alt Lit* as Electronic or Digital literature? The answer may vary depending on the author or on a particular work. There are authors who have played with both digitalized and digital formats in order to produce and present their works, so we can consider this fact as a proof of the liminal role that *Alt Lit* authors play inside the contemporary avant-garde literary scene. Furthermore, *Alt Lit* literature should be considered as a transition between traditional modes of literature and the new electronically produced literary works. But it is also important to point out that *Alt Lit* goes further into the mere presentation of the text itself: the relevance of these works rather relies on how language and ways of thinking are influenced by the presence of digital media and the contemporary socio-cultural trends produced during this era.

1.3. Definition of the Alt Lit

What is *Alt Lit*? The name of this community stands as a double-meaning reference in which word-play and allusions to Internet culture are synthesized through the viscosity of the text: “Alt” refers simultaneously to the button of the computer’s keyboard “Alt” used to alternate other key’s functions; and, on the other hand, to the word “alternative” itself. In the words of Allie Jones, this

⁷ Link reference for Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*: <http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/PatchworkGirl.html>

⁸ Link reference for Billy Bly’s *We Descend*: <http://www.wedescend.net/>

⁹ Link reference for the *Electronic Literature Organization*’s official webpage: <http://eliterature.org/>

term would be “... used to refer to a close-knit community of young, self-promoting writer and editors who publish literature and poetry deeply informed by (and often about) the internet.” (Jones 2014) This description can be considered an accurate definition of what the *Alt Lit* community stands for to those who are not previously familiarized with them.

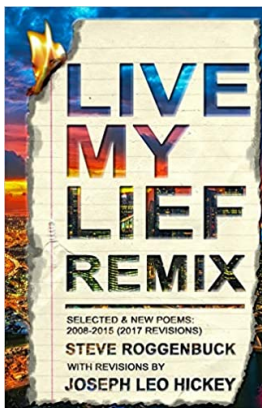
Despite being a disseminated group formed by diverse young authors from different backgrounds, who mainly write in English, the huge vast space that the Internet conforms makes it impossible to categorize the different variations that this new literary form may have across the rest of the world. Every individual author has different motifs and experiences that show up on their works, as it could be related to gender, race, sexuality and other topics associated to identity issues, which are also difficult to label or to categorize precisely most of times. But what is important to remark is the fact that this sense of community, of belonging to a group conformed by other individuals, is the key idea, or rather a feeling, that glues this relatively chaotic and dispersed identities and personalities that inhabit in and out the net.

This is a curious phenomenon that is principally encouraged by the promised “interactivity” displayed through the new social media: the idea of a “collective culture,” which is originated from the participation and exchange between individuals who are connected through their media devices and platforms online rather than physically. This culture promotes a “stable, guiding source of belongingness, security, and identity” (Lull 2006, 44), which is paradoxically opposed to the idea of isolation and alienation that seems to result from the virtual generated by the non-material spaces of the Internet.

For literary critic Seth Abramson *Alt Lit* would be described as a type of “metamodern literature” which has been unfairly undermined for its apparent “meaninglessness” in terms of content, whereas he considers that the quality of this literary movement is “delightfully quirky” in its textual simplicity. He refutes all criticism that might label *Alt Lit* under other Postmodernist tendencies such as “unadulterated poststructuralism” or “uncreative writing.” (Abramson 11th May 2017, *Huffpost*) Furthermore, he finds that the first *Alt Lit* anthology ever published, *The YOLO Pages* by *Boost House* in 2014, which is mainly composed by “Twitter Feeds, doctored JPGs, and Internet Friendly screeds,” is a “consistently humorous, generous, surprising, and relevant” (Abramson 11th May 2017, *Huffpost*) literary work according to the online social trends of the newer generations. By acknowledging the literary and sociocultural value that these underrated literary works have to understand the artistic dynamics of the current times, Abramson

compares Roggenbuck's avant-gardist attempts to those performed by Ezra Pound in *The Cantos*, despite the possibility of an resulting failure, as he considers it happened to Pound himself.

Shortly after, another printed *Alt Lit* anthology was released under the title of *40 Likely To Die Before 40* by *Civil Coping Mechanisms* (2014). The collection included an afterword, written by writer Christopher Higgs, in which he briefly frames the literary and sociocultural context in which the *Alt Lit* can be inscribed in. He describes the *Alt Lit* community as a group of “young avant-garde writers” who are “centered on and drawing from the internet, online culture, and social media” (Higgs 2014, 418) He also remarks that the range of topics these pieces of writing depict does not differ much from traditional ones, such as “loneliness, exuberance, alienation, jubilation, connection, anger, humor, sorrow, love, and so on.” (Higgs 2014, 419) In short, by making explicit references to Gertrude Stein's *Composition as Explanation*, Higgs describes that the history of literature is all about the changes in the form, rather than the content, which differs from one generation to following one. In this particular new literary wave, he points out to the importance of “engaging with current technologies” (Higgs 2014, 420) that this new generation of authors has displayed on their texts. It is basically suggested that without the existence of the Internet, the *Alt Lit* would have never existed at all: both occurrences are inevitably inter-connected and dependent. To name a few



STEVE
ROGGENBUCK'S *LIEF*
MY LIFE (2008-2015)

of the most notorious *Alt Lit* authors, those are Noah Cicero (b. 1980), novelist, better known for his nihilist millennial satire *Got to Work and Do*

Your Job. Care for your Children. Pay your Bills. Obey the Law. Buy Products (2013, Lazy Fascist Press); Tao Lin (b. 1983), novelist and poet of Taiwanese origin, and founder of publishing press Muumuu House (2008), author of the controversial *Richard Yates* (Melville House Publishing, 2010), *Taipei* (Vintage Books, 2013), or more recently *Trip* (Penguin Random House, 2018); and Steve Roggenbuck (b. 1987), poet and video artist famous for his YouTube videos and creative misspelling, his most

influential work being *LIVE MY LIEF: SELECTED AND NEW POEMS (2008-2015)*, published by *Boost House* in 2015.

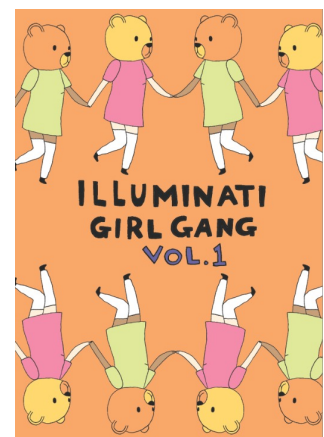


TAO LIN

TAO LIN'S *RICHARD YATES*
(2010)

1.4. Characteristics of the Alt Lit

The most common traits can be summarized as follows: self-publication and self-promotion through a constant presence at many social media networks, as well as the use of a new art concept very much inspired by the new visual possibilities offered by the Internet. As a result of this desire to escape the traditional forms and limitations imposed by most renowned publishing houses, these authors have created open and free literary magazines and blogs in order to promote new authors, and also to spread their need for creativity and originality outside of mainstream platforms. The most popular ones are *Illuminate Girl Gang*, *New Wave Vomit*, *Pop Serial*, *Metazen*, *Internet Poetry* and *HTML Giant*, to name but a few. Their mission is to encourage people to engage into literary and artistic discussion, and to produce new forms of art which expresses the influence that the Internet has on this new generation of artists. The *Alt Lit* community has been described as “... hip, youthful, awkward, and uncomfortably self-aware” (Jones 30th September 2014a, *Gawker*), whose main literary features are “... direct speech, expressions of aching desire, and a wide-eyed sincerity” (Goldsmith 7th May 2014, *The New Yorker*) This concept has been already labelled as ‘New Sincerity,’ a term that encompasses authors such as Steve Roggenbuck and Tao Lin, despite their reticence to accept the influence of authors like David F. Wallace and Franzen, who are also often associated to the



ILLUMINATI GIRL GANG
COVER



POP SERIAL COVER

term. As Abramson pointed out, Postmodernist criticism seems to consider this “optimistic, naive, and/or sincere work” as “bad writing” in terms quality, since these traits often involve the production of an “unadulterated thus uncompromised” (Abramson 11th May 2017, *Huffpost*) content that is not easily accepted by the Academia. In this respect, Jameson remarks that these new authors explore the “artificial effects of sincerity,” as a simulacrum of “the real-life author’s ‘actual sincerity’,” (Jameson 4th June 2012, *HTLM Giant*) which means that this type of writing does not involve any real expression of the author’s intentional honesty but a projected delusion of what sincerity might actually look like. The definition of the term is provided in his article as it follows:

The invention of the New Sincerity is the invention of a way of writing that will not, for at least a while, feel hackneyed or trite. It will create the illusion of transparency, of direct communication, of the lack of artifice. *It does this precisely by means of artifice.* (Jameson 4th June 2012, *HTLM Giant*)

This term, also associated to 'New Childishness,' becomes a total reaction against Postmodernist attitudes towards language, by reproducing the speech of a child that is "...unable to edit or censor oneself." (Jameson 4th June 2012, *HTLM Giant*) In this sense, Roggenbuck¹⁰ reclaims the importance of the writer as a physically real person and dismisses Barthes' argument of the "death of the author" in literature. He remarks how the Internet and the new different social media are reinforcing the importance of this paradoxical truth, that of the importance of the online literary persona in connection to authorship and the biography, all performed at once through a virtual medium: pictures, blog designing, status updates, comments, and 'about' pages allow Internet writers to present themselves as real people outside the online realm with a specific artistic agenda and a biographical background that influences their work. Whether this way of presenting the author is factual or accurate to reality or virtuality is left to further discussion later in other chapters.

In an interview, Noah Cicero, an *Alt Lit* author, pointed out that the *Alt Lit* community especially rejects the concept of what is considered to be "good" in art, because "... honesty isn't pretty" (Spilker 20th June 2012, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*). This directly connects to the widespread belief that the Internet offers new possibilities of freedom through its accessibility, as well as the creation of new ways of understanding reality and identity formations:

Because the Internet allows for democracy, it lets people become who they want to be without having to fit into a certain mode of operation. (Spilker 20th June 2012, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*)

Jacob Steinberg remarks that the "crafted tone of sincerity, as opposed to genuine authorial intimacy or proximity to reality" is the real achievement of the many literary effects created by various *Alt Lit* authors, but what he really considers more remarkable about them is their resistance to "the traditional publishing process" due to the boundless opportunities for self-publication offered by the online networks (Steinberg 1st July 2012, *Magukkadon*). This new mode of publishing, through blogs, Twits or Tumblr posts, amongst other online platforms, provides the author with full freedom in terms of creating alternative and new content, as well as a total control over the publication of their texts without much alteration or censorship coming from editors,

¹⁰ These statements were taken from **Roggenbuck's** personal blog entries, whose links are no longer available. The link to his personal webpage: <http://steveroggenbuck.com/>

publishers or third parties. Also, this involves an active display of self-promotion and marketing in different media, online ones mainly, to reach a wider potential readership depending on the author's own artistic aesthetics. Millennials' constant use of the social media has also had a notable influence on *Alt Lit* writing style, and this has contributed to the creation of a new linguistic register, the so called "Internet language", which combines different strategies, such as emoticons¹¹ and memes¹². In this sense, the incorporation of daily-life language used by young people can become a source of representing new ways for linguistic expression, as well as to portray the diversity and multiculturalism that can be found in US¹³ society nowadays.

Also, the literary community adopts an alternative lifestyle, which turns into an expression of their desire to differentiate themselves from Postmodern artists and the general attitude of content accommodated in US society in the recent decades. The spirit of the *Alt Lit* is very much inspired by decadent figures of literature like Rimbaud, Whitman, Celine, Bukowski, or Hunter S. Thompson. Most of these authors had a life dedicated to art, adopting a bohemian life-style in order to find inspiration through controversial topics: the use of drugs, the addiction to sex and a sense of alienation are also central themes for *Alt Lit* literary production. Furthermore, Cicero affirms that he and Tao Lin did not care about Postmodern US most acclaimed authors such as Eggers, David Foster Wallace and Franzen because they find them "... all bourgeois": they were middle-class white men who had normal jobs, like "professors and do-gooders ..." (Spilker 20th June 2012, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*) who wrote books and did not live a "literary life" in a full sense, according to *Alt Lit* philosophical values.

1.5. History of the Alt Lit: from genesis to (des)-integration

According to Frank Hinton, founder of the official webpage, Tumblr page and Twitter account *Alt Lit Gossip*¹⁴, the name of group emerged as a mere coincidence: in summer 2011, an

¹¹ **Emoticon** is a short sequence of keyboard letters and symbols, usually emulating a facial expression, that complements a text message. Source: <https://whatis.techtarget.com/search/query?q=emoticon>

¹² **Meme** is a cultural artifact that spreads rapidly, reaching a very large digital audience within a short period of time, often referred to as viral content. It is puzzling, humorous, entertaining or inspiring. It is delivered through images or video files but it can also be simply text. Source: <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/Internet-meme>

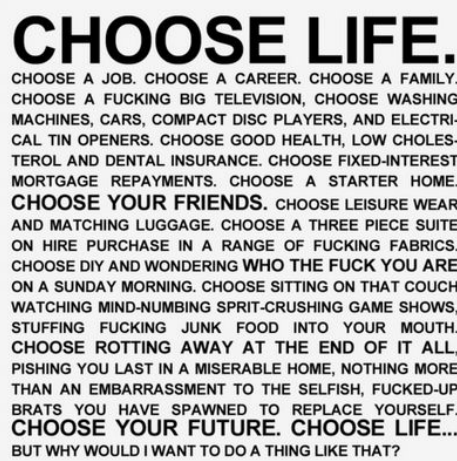
¹³ I am aware that the widely use of the term *American* in order to denominate those citizens of the United States of America is commonly used in the English language. However, as a Spanish speaker, I find this use problematic, so I decided to change it to *US* to make more clear that my Thesis focuses on US writers to avoid confusion, nuisance and, most importantly, to stop contributing to the appropriation of the term by the speakers of the USA in a conscious manner, since in Spanish I would use the term *estadounidense* to referred to this nationality.

¹⁴ Link to the Tumblr original *Alt Lit Gossip* website: <http://altlitgossip.tumblr.com/>

anonymous online user, without an apparent relation to the writers involved in the *Alt Lit* scene, created an account using the afore-mentioned name in the website Tumblr, and who was also owned by the same person who created the equivalent Twitter account *twitter.com/litgossip*¹⁵ (Spilker 20th June 2012, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*). Suddenly, every account related to “Alt Lit Gossip” disappeared without leaving any possible trace of his original author. Then, and because of the success of both the name and both platforms, Hinton decided to take over the label and bring it back online. This way, *Alt Lit* started to be used to refer to the community of authors he was related to, with the purpose of using this name in order to “fit a place that seemed vacant and I was in full support” (Spilker 20th June 2012, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*) This meant a starting point from which the Internet audience acknowledged the *Alt Lit* as a community committed to the production of literature and other media. As the *Alt Lit* was officially born, this trend started to spread quickly outside the EEUU, just as fast and far as the Internet connection could reach: passing on its freshness, carefree enthusiasm, like a truly viral phenomenon.

According to Noah Cicero, one of the veteran authors, *Alt Lit* emerges as a “rejection of the 90’s and the early part of last decade. ... everyone was still very much into either getting published by the *Paris Review* or writing like beatniks or punks and slam poetry I didn’t like Eggers, DFW (David Foster Wallace) and Franzen, I found them all bourgeois. I was reading like Sartre and Nietzsche at that time.” (Spilker 20th June 2012, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*) In this sense, Cicero remarks the boundless possibilities offered by the Internet in terms of publication, inspiration and creative licenses, rejecting completely the Postmodern attitude towards literature that US authors took as a distinctive trade-mark in their work through works of metafiction, disconnected from the reality of their times.

Thus, we can appreciate that young *Alt Lit* artists connect with a feeling of dissatisfaction that a young generation, in this case of the USA, feels towards an obsolete system that has already failed them. By trying and experimenting with alternative ways of living, they have already moved away from the conventions of accommodated middle-class lifestyle, and from the consumerism of pre-made mass-media culture, which is represented by their parents’ generation. No prospects on what they have been taught at

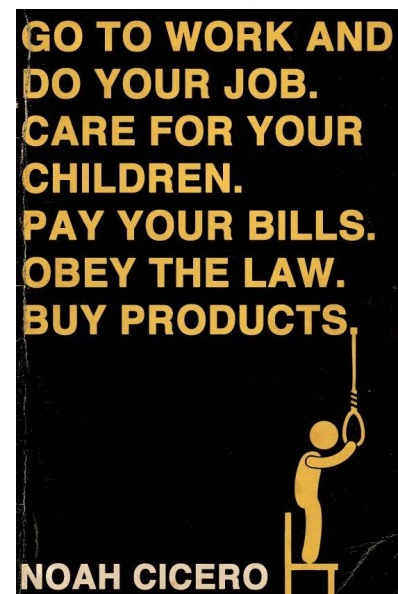


TRAINSPOTTING’S QUOTE ‘CHOOSE LIFE’ (1996)

¹⁵ The Twitter account aforementioned is no longer available.

school and at the family nucleus about living a stable life: destined to work in white-collar jobs after graduating, with an outstanding college formation; to form a family; and to own their houses and have their big cars at the suburbs, as Cicero illustrates in his book *Go to work and do your job. Care for your children. Pay your bills. Obey the law. Buy products* (2013). This idealized US picture does no longer appeal to Millennials at all: just a shattered family picture they are not even considering to (re)-produce or imitate themselves again. This nihilistic picture drawn by Cicero, in both his book's title and its plot, reminds of the opening scene from Irving Welsh's movie adaptation of *Trainspotting* (1996), in which the protagonist Renton, interpreted by Ewan McGregor, makes an anti-motivational ranting speech about what means to 'choose life' for a young man like him from a utterly sarcastic perspective.¹⁶

The Millennial Generation, also known as 'Generation Y' or 'Echo Boomers,' refers to those born between the early 1980's to the early 2000's, according to Horowitz's article *After Gen X, Millennials, what should next generation be?* (Horowitz 4th May 2012, *USA Today*). This generation is being followed by the 'Generation X,' which is the one born right after the Western Post-World War II 'Baby Boom,' which goes from the early 1960's to the early 1980's. According to Edwood Carlson, the Millennial generation somehow ends with the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001, particularly referring to the US society (Kalb 7th September 2009, *Newsweek*). For Howe, Strauss and Matson, Millennials are generally characterized as being more 'civic minded,' that is to be more concerned about being part of a community, both locally and globally (Howe, Strauss & Matson 2000, 370). This claim is supported by Jean Twenge, who also states that this generation possesses other positive traits, such as confidence and tolerance, in higher levels compared to previous generations. But, on the other hand, they can also be negatively perceived as being highly narcissist, and as having a bigger sense of entitlement (Twenge 2006, 53).



NOAH CICERO'S *GO TO WORK AND DO YOUR JOB. CARE FOR YOUR CHILDREN. PAY YOUR BILLS. OBEY THE LAW. BUY PRODUCTS* (2013)

¹⁶ The well-known "Choose Life" internal-monologue scene from Mark Renton's movie *Trainspotting* (1996): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCxgqHqakXc>

Furthermore, it is reported that this generation has been the first generation born in an era of economic affluence and incredible technological advances, but who has a worse working and living prospects than previous generations. Recent statistics show that this new generation of US citizens are the first one in the Modern Era to have higher levels of student loan debts and unemployment, despite having higher accessibility to a better education and professional formation than ever before (Pew Research Center 7th March 2014, *Pew Social Trends*). Marc Prensky describes in *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants* (2001) that there is a different pattern to be found in Millennial students in terms of behavior, values and attitudes. This can also be attributed to the influence of the new technological and economic implications that the Internet 's presence has on their daily lives. Furthermore, these results show a changing pattern in the way that information is processed differently by the newer generations:

They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to "serious" work. (Prensky 2001, 2)

In a different way, Ahop calls them 'Trophy Kids,' since this term reflects "the trend in competitive sports, as well as many other aspects of life, where mere participation is frequently enough for a reward. It has been reported that this is an issue in corporate environments" (Ahop 21th October 2012, *Online WSJ*) This evidences the need for validation that Millennials are constantly looking through constant recognition and praise for every task they perform at the workplace, affecting their self-esteem and productivity performance simultaneously. This competitive attitude has been highly nurtured by their parents and other previous generations:

Millennials are truly "trophy kids," the pride and joy of their parents. The millennials were lavishly praised and often received trophies when they excelled, and sometimes when they didn't, to avoid damaging their self-esteem. [...]

Now what happens when these trophy kids arrive in the workplace with greater expectations than any generation before them? (Ahop 21st October 2012, *Online WSJ*)

Millennials have great expectations about their future, even though real future possibilities for both professional and social rewards are not that encouraging in a literal sense. This view is supported by David Burstein in his book *Fast Future*, where he connects a "pragmatic idealism" displayed by these new generations, as "... a deep desire to make the world a better place combined with an understanding that doing so requires building new institutions while working inside and outside existing institutions" (Burstein 2013, 3). For others, the events of the 9/11, particularly in the USA, opened youngsters' eyes towards the rest of the world's geopolitics, providing them with

new perspectives and awareness towards global issues and the position of the United States of America as a nation in the world, recovering a little sense of patriotism and belonging to a community:

Indeed, a recent survey of college students found that they include the government and groups like the Peace Corps and Teach for America among the top 10 places they'd like to work. Before 9/11, for-profit corporations dominated students' top choices. "I think that has an interesting 9/11 echo," says Howe, who believes the attacks and other turbulent events, including the invasion of Iraq, prompted young people to want to bring back a sense of control in the world. (Kalb 7th September 2009, *Newsweek*)

Additionally, the Internet has also contributed to the way youngsters communicate by using digital technologies and social media, which also allows them to have access to unlimited and free content about almost everything. They are also able to communicate throughout the world by being exposed and getting to know different and alternative experiences, as these ones become expressed through the diverse online platforms which exist nowadays. Furthermore, some authors have pointed out to the definite collapse of the so-called *American Dream*. The financial crisis and the *Great Recession* (2007-2009), that still prevails somehow in the social and the economy of today, have also affected the ways young people visualize their near futures as adults, as it clearly shows the statistics provided by *Vice* contributor Haisam Hussein in his article 'Millennial gigs vs. Baby Boomer Careers' (Hussein 23rd October 2018, *Vice*). This contrasts with the addictive enthusiasm about life and hedonism showed in different social media, like Facebook, Tumblr or Instagram. A contradiction that may have political motivations and economic interests behind.

Returning to the *Alt Lit* scene, Noah Cicero remarks that he differentiates two generational phases, or even two different generations, inside the *Alt Lit* community itself that can be extended to describe Millennials as a group of differentiated Millennial stages too:

I feel that Roggenbuck changed the game a lot. He brought in a new positivity that a lot of younger people could relate to. Feel early online literature, Tao, Blake Butler, Kendra Grant Malone, Brandon Scott Gorrell put out a lot of really depressed and morbid shit. [...] they are younger and were too young to see the early Bush years, and how America turned into a war mongering hate machine. And there was 9/11 which didn't help our souls. [...] Roggenbuck and the newer writers have Obama and the new optimism in their writing. (Spilker 20th October 2012, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*)

As it has been previously mentioned, Millennials are supposedly the most tolerant adults, because they are the first most diverse and multiracial generation the United States of America, according to a trend report made by the *Pew Research Center* in 2014. Somehow, the *Alt Lit* community represents a new US society that is highly influenced by the Millennial generation's views and values and the new technological advancements of this era, which have allowed the rapid

spread of new ways of thinking about politics, economy, race, gender and culture. The diversity of online platforms has turned into the perfect medium to give voice to authors from different backgrounds, as well as to serve as a platform that gives a more accurate and democratic representation of how society and culture actually look like nowadays.

Nevertheless, the success of *Alt Lit* was abruptly disturbed due to a series of scandals that put into question the idealist harmony that their chaotic members were living in, who continuously supported each other through online networks, poetry slams and other public reading sessions at different alternative physical locations. Despite their quality value as literature was put into question many times by diverse critics, as it shows Josh Baines' article on *Vice*, their authors did not stop producing and publishing through different medium platforms, inspiring other younger generations to join their trend and to follow their 'do-it-yourself' attitude. But once after all, the scandals started to rise and spread like dynamite across the rapid and fast wireless world like gossip, rumors and multiple accusations threatened the stability of the already well-established community and the literary career of some of its more prominent and famous figures. The inevitable downfall of *Alt Lit* and its most representative and major exponents due to sexual scandals and other discriminatory occurrences started off when their popularity was at its hottest peak. Whether a coincidence or not, it is left to further discussions which does not concern this current paper at this point.

1.5.1. The (Sex)candal: Same Old' (Miss)takes

As it was mentioned before, the reputation of the *Alt Lit* community did not last too long: in September 2014, a scandal exploded like a nuclear bomb throughout the Internet. Sophia Katz, a 20-year-old Canadian aspiring novelist, published a piece of non-fiction in which she described her experience among the *Alt Lit* community during her week-long trip to New York, and how one of its members sexually abused her in various occasions. Despite trying to keep her aggressors' identity out of the public knowledge, other *Alt Lit* writers, in particular fellow writer Sarah Jean Alexander¹⁷, decided to make public the name of Stephen Tully Dierks as the perpetrator of such aggressions. Katz herself describes such events in the following fragment:

Stan (aka Steve) was the type of person to steadily give you compliments throughout the time you spent together, seemingly without expecting something in return, but actually, secretly expecting a lot in return. [...]

¹⁷ The post of Dierk's identity revelation as the perpetrator of the abuses can be found in Alexander's Tumblr: <http://sarahjeanax.tumblr.com/post/98722085091>

That evening we were in his room sitting on his bed, and he began kissing me again. I felt unsure of how to proceed. I had no interest in making out with him or having sex with him, but had a feeling that it would ‘turn into an ordeal’ if I rejected him ... I knew I had nowhere else to stay, and if I upset him that I might be forced to leave. We continued kissing and I felt like vomiting. (Katz 2014, *Medium*)

After this revelation, the story seemed to encourage other victims to come out and corroborate Katz’s story, as if her testimony was not just an isolated case. As a result of this matter, Dierks disappeared from the Internet sphere after announcing on Facebook his sudden retirement from public life, since such accusations were thrown against his persona. Allie Jones also described the terrible account of another victim, the promising *Alt Lit* writer Tiffany Wines, whom “Dierks allegedly invited [...] to a reading, got her drunk, and took her back to his after she asked to be dropped off at hers” (Jones 2014a., *Gawker*) The similarities between both testimonies are evident, in which a tone of powerlessness and vulnerability is a trait in common at both of women’s narratives:

He began caressing my arm and pressed his mouth against mine with feverish urgency. I protested, but it immediately became clear that my attempts were futile. I lay still and stared at the ceiling as he groped and fondled me. Eventually, as Sophia did in her story, I began to do things that I thought would make him finish faster. He used my body off and on all night until he fell asleep. (Wines 17th April 2014, *Sweet Dreams You are very Beautiful*)

As Pandora’s Box was opened, lots of accusations on sexism and racism were already thrown to the *Alt Lit* male authors before these revelations on the Internet. Previously, Safy-Hallan Farah called out into these issues, stating that *Alt Lit* was once more a celebration of “White Supremacy” under the excuse of marginality and rebellion against the establishment, while discriminating and excluding non-white male authors “through ignoring the creative efforts of everyone who isn’t in the White Boy’s Club of (online publications) [...] and [...]. If you’re not one of the [...] and [...] tokens or a girl Alt Lit bros deem attractive, then your work will likely be slept on or tokenized” (Farah 16th December 2013, *The Fanzine*) But the explicit account of their misdeeds against women, by turning sexist attitudes into sexual abuses, were the last straw for the critics and non-critics of the *Alt Lit* Community. As a result of these series of scandals, the platform magazine *HTML GIANT* announced its temporary shutdown, and Dierks is no longer the editor of *Pop Serial*. Also, other *Alt Lit* authors, such as Sarah J. Alexander, dropped out from projects which were associated to editors and authors accused of sexual harassment and abuse, as a form of protest and rejection of what was happening at that moment.

Another sad case is the terrible testimony and story written by Kat Dixon about her relationship with another well-known *Alt Lit* author, Gregory Sherl, which is worth reading to realize the suffering these influencing men can inflict under the excuse of intimacy. Her testimony is a clear case of domestic violence among this young generation of apparently progressive and liberal artists. Groom also confirms Sherl's attitude with his previous partners since she was involved in an online long-distance relationship with the young author, and confirms the constant psychological abuse she had to endure during that period of time with him (Dixon 2014, *Connotation Press*). As a result of this, some critics, like Rebeca Vipon Brink, questions the safety of women among these online predators that redeem their abuse in the name of art and freedom:

So where are the safe spaces for women in writing? It's not on the Internet, where men deluge us with sexist tweets and threats or write obsessive and/ or sexual blogs about us. It's not at readings, where men get us drunk and pressure us into having sex with them. It's not in awards, where our personal perspectives – specifically, the non-fictional details of the realities of being a woman – are simply bypassed. Now, tell me again that structural sexism isn't really a problem in literature. (Brink 2014, *The Frisky*)

The scandal also reached *Alt Lit* main star, Tao Lin. After the publication of his polemic *Richard Yates*, which shares many similitudes to Nabokov's *Lolita*, the truth behind the apparent fictional account of a relationship between a 16-years-old with a much older man has turned out to be factual one. E.R. Kennedy, Tao's ex-partner, revealed that the true story behind the novella: the relationship between the main characters is a truthful account of Tao's abusive relationship with him when (s)he was a minor, and still identified as female under the name of Ellen. According to Kennedy, (s)he was emotionally and sexually abused by Tao, and that he even included the mails they exchanged throughout their relationship in the book, hence exploiting her persona and their abusive relationship in order to make literary profit, as Ryan accounts in her *Jezebel* article *Alt Lit Icon Tao Lin Accused of Statutory Rape and Abuse* (Ryan 2nd October 2014, *Jezebel*). Thanks to the Internet, these abuses came to the public eye, turning the personal into the political for the joys of poetical justice, before it could reach to other potential victims, and totally destroys the community's reputation.

Shortly after, another *Alt Lit* tyrant's career came to an end too, in this case the *Plain Wrap Press* editor, Janey Smith¹⁸. Dianna Dragonetti came forward after all the rape accusations thrown to Dierks and Tao to publicly denounce him as a personal *vendetta*. Having worked and being professionally associated with Smith for years, the young writer also speaks on behalf of his fellow

¹⁸ Steven Trull is the legal name of Janey Smith.

writer, Alexandra Naughton¹⁹, who turned out to be also a victim of sexual assault perpetrated by Smith. Disappointed by how the Internet reacted to Dierks' rape allegations, Dragonetti outraged through various articles published in various sites by denouncing that Smith's case did not receive the equal support from the online community, when he has been already denounced the abuses committed inside the *Alt Lit* community against women and other marginalized groups, such as LGTB and people of color artists. Samples of these public reports are articles like *Alt Lit is not so 'alt': How the alternative literature community failed women* or *The Alt Lit Boy's club Mentality is Exactly the Problem*, both published by Dragonetti himself in October 2014, and which can be found at the bibliography.

Previous to these accusations, Smith was already known for having published a highly offensive work with the infamous title of *Fuck List: A List of Writers I Want to fuck (Or Get Fucked By)* (2013) at *HTML Giant*²⁰, in which he recreates his pure sexual fantasies about real people, including *Alt Lit* women artists, lowering them to the level of mere sexual objects without their consent. Dragonetti, who also appears in that list, finds this gesture symbolically denigrating, stating that this "is a pretty clear engagement with rape culture" (Dragonetti 9th October 2014, *Luna Luna Mag*). Smith also wrote about Marie Calloway, the *Alt Lit* femme *per excellence*, and suggested that she "speaks with her pussy" (Smith 25th December 2011, *Big Other*): an outrageously misogynist comment on a fellow writer, which obviously shows no respect to her person just because she is a woman writing explicitly about sex in her work. There were also suggestive comments of pedophilic fetishization and "sad girl misogyny" displayed by some *Alt Lit* male authors in both fiction and reality, which has come to the concern of many critics. This is clearly illustrated by Miles Klee's article *Stephen Tully Dierks, Tao Lin and the alt lit scene's rape problem*, where he states that the Internet has facilitated these "imbalanced relationships between alt lit men and teenage women" (Klee 24th July 2014, *Daily Dot*) by erasing the boundaries between age distinction which would be more evident in 'face to face' situations, and helped to reinforce power dynamics based on the submissive position that the newcomers have towards some of the male leaders, who are mainly the ones in charge of publishing and editing the most representative *Alt Lit* magazines and journals.

¹⁹ The full text of *If You Don't Know, Now You Know* can be found at her Tumblr page: <http://thetsaritsa.tumblr.com/post/96485621893/if-you-dont-know-now-you-know>

²⁰ The original post is already expired after the *HTLM Giant* shutdown, but it was also made public by the Facebook page of *Civil Coping Mechansims*, which can be found in the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/CCMPress/posts/janey-smith-has-written-the-fuck-list-or-writers-he-wants-to-fuck-complete-with-/543546445731634/>

On the other hand, some voices have risen in order to defend their fellow members, as it proves the *Open Letter to the Internet* written by Elizabeth Ellen at the literary online journal *Hobart*, shortly after the overwhelming flow of accusations and attacks the *Alt Lit* community and the rest of its members had to endure in September 2014. At her letter, she expresses her distress about the recent events by questioning whether these rape accusations and all the consequent witch-hunting which came afterwards turned into a paranoid rapist vendetta to wash out the rage about “the disparity of males and females in the literary community” (Ellen 2014, *Hobart Pulp*) She argues that the inequality in power and the institutionalized abuse that is culturally and socially systematic have to be analyzed in detail and individually, by going through case by case instead of generalizing about both victims and aggressors from an emotional perspective. She continues arguing that the ambiguities about the circumstances in which the events took place should not be taken into criminalizing neither part involved in this type of cases, and turn them into ‘public shaming’ without a proven trial:

I think the hysteria is a) getting caught up in the whirlwind of ‘taking down’ male writers/editors b) a mistaken belief that *this* (these takedowns) is equal to female empowerment c) the tweets of E.R.Kennedy. (Ellen 2014, *Hobart Pulp*)

These series of sexual scandals would not have been so relevant and determining for the end of these male artists’ careers if rape culture was not already endemic in US culture and society nowadays: from governmental institutions, sex educators have tried to solve the problem by educating teenagers into the consent statement of ‘ask first’ and a clearly ‘no is no’ as refusal to engage into sexual activities. Sometimes, confusion may arise from what this consent means, putting victims into a helpless position of self-repression and ambiguous submissiveness. In this sense, especially in Dierks’, Smith’s and even Tao’s cases, these men took advantage of their privileged positions as acclaimed online artists and/or editors, by using their power and forcing women to get engaged into apparently non-consensual sexual relationships. Nowadays, this particular situation still resonates with current activist trends such as the *#MeToo* movement, which I further explore later in this Thesis.

1.5.2. *Alt [C]Lit*: gender re-imagining the (Alt)ernative

At the aftermath of these serious sexual scandals and the overwhelming number of victims and their revelations, many women writers published on The *Alt Lit* Facebook group their intention of creating a literary scene of their own as a double mechanism for both self-protection against predators and male censorship, by proclaiming a sort of manifesto, which goes as it follows:

dear women/womyn/femme/nb ppl of alt lit:

how would u all feel about creating a space for just us? as much as i think we all need to work together ("all" —> men & women & everything in between) to make the world a better place, i cant help but think after this week's revelations it might be nice to like... shut the door on dudes for a second

what is the female* alt lit voice? how can we heal? im rly into building an alt lit sisterhood idk

no boys allowed (Jones 7th September 2014, *Newsweek*)

This new wave of ‘no boys allowed’ may seem a radical position, but in fact, the *Alt Lit* community has been accused of behaving mainly as a ‘Boy’s Club’ not long before the scandals. Dianna Dragonetti pointed out to this flaw since most of the *Alt Lit* well-known works were created by “empowering predominantly white, cis, heterosexual male writers and giving them voice, enabling them to abuse through an ‘alternative’ veneer [...] while still aligning with normativity and endangering the marginalized” (Dragonetti 2nd October 2014, *The Tusk*). This is what Robyn Pennacchia remarks in her article *Sexism, sexual assault and the threat of the ‘non-bro’*, where she established an interesting sociological analysis of men who consider themselves feminist allies, but in fact, they prove to be the worst enemies a social justice movement could possibly have:

One thing all these groups have in common is that they are primarily populated by men who think they are not ‘bros.’ Usually, they consider themselves intellectuals ... For the most part, they’re not ‘alpha-males’, they weren’t jock in high school-they were often, nerdy or even shy.

They are always the first to lock arms with you and rail against sexism coming from these *other* types of men ... They like to think of themselves as ‘the good guys’ and the jocks and bros as ‘the bad guys’. (Penacchia 2014, *Death and Taxes Mag*)

Hence, Mychel Denzel Smith comments on the dangers of men proclaiming themselves as feminists and then consider themselves “absolved of the toxic sexist culture and therefore incapable of harm” (Smith 2014, *Feministing*). He points out that men have to prove themselves worthy of being called feminist since they are already benefiting from patriarchal socio-economic and cultural structures of oppression and privilege, so they must also recognize the subtlety of sexist micro-aggressions that they reproduce and perform without being aware of them. He states that, maybe, they could try to be allies, but they will never be genuine feminists in the end:

I am a wannabe. We’re all wannabes. Any man claiming to be a feminist, adhere to a feminist politics, be a feminist ally, to do a feminist activist work- we’re all wannabes. The unlearning of misogyny, sexism and patriarchy is not done by standing on proverbial mountaintop and shouting ‘I Am a Feminist.’ You can’t purchase a bunch of ‘This is What a Feminist Looks Like’ t-shirt and think you’ve got it down. You can’t be ‘good’ just because you’ve declared yourself so. (Smith 2014, *Feministing*)

As we can see, *Alt Lit* male authors failed by reproducing the same cultural and social structures of the patriarchy that still represses both men and women: they are no exception in this respect. In fact, they have been also accused of reproducing the ‘Boy Writer’ complex that Paul Auster²¹ once defined in an interview with Isaac Gewirtz about contemporary literature, which is later described by Kia Groom and Sony Vatomsky at *Quaint Magazine* who applied this term to explain the *Alt Lit* men’s problematic behavior and their implication in the scandal:

Boy writer and ‘broet’ are synonymous: their attempt with a new generation of artists, scholars, and activists- they very people they repeatedly exploit and abuse – is becoming increasingly transparent. You cannot marginalize a majority. Boy writers shroud themselves in anti-establishment rhetoric because they know that rhetoric is the next big thing, and they feel entitled to govern in. They deserve to control the literary revolution, even as they’re abusing the very people that revolution ought to serve. When alt lit includes women’s voices, it’s a token gesture, an attempt to veil boy writers in empty feminist sentiment to disguise the fact that *it was always about using you. All along.* (Groom & Vatomsky 2014, *Quaint Magazine*)

Klara Du Plessis agrees on this respect and adds that the discrimination of women in the arts, among other fields of culture and knowledge, is not something new. According to her, it seems that despite the fact that there are also many other *Alt Lit* women artists who have no relation to the abuse charges, many online sites suggest that they are not relevant enough in order to recuperate the spirit of the movement, as if it were only the male authors’s responsibility to be in charge of the community’s leadership. The relevance of a literary movement like this one seems to be still characterized by the relevance of its male producers rather than on the its female counterparts: “It is disappointing that this kind of gender inequity is still perpetuated today, both in terms of the disregards of women’s key role in the *Alt Lit* movement, but also in the sense that the women who so bravely stepped forward to uncover their traumatic experiences are labeled as ex-girlfriend, as part of a story, rather than as the producers of stories themselves” (Du Plessis 6th October 2014, *On Methator*), as Du Plessis laments at her article. For her, women are underestimated once again and, at the same time, they have become more publicly acknowledged as victims rather than artists, perpetuating this double discrimination.

In this sense, we can claim that the ‘White Boy Club Mentality’ was a reality in the *Alt Lit* community, as Dragonetti had previously pointed out. These cases are not unrelated to the rest of the arts history, including some other sordid ones like alleged famous rapists and pedophiles such as Lewis Carroll, Roman Polanski and, more recently in 2014, Woody Allen. Also, in relation to the

²¹ *Paul Auster and Isaac Gewirtz on Poe -LIVE from the NYPL* (2014): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xblj3uyMxso>

Internet sphere, we find the particularly outrageous case of *YouTube* British Star Sam Pepper, who was already famous for basing his prank videos on sexually harassing women in different public spaces, including pinching their bottoms or kissing them on the mouth without their consent. More recently, other activist movements have been popularized through online platforms, in particular that of *Twitter*'s hashtags, in order to viralize and create awareness about sexual harassment, assault and violence after the polemic Weinstein's case and the online mobilization the *#MeToo* movement has recently provoked in 2017.

Despite all the negative events surrounding the *Alt Lit* literary online and off-online scenes lately, I would like to remark that not everything is a bad about this generation of innovative authors. Thanks to the Internet, the work of many women, LGTB and people of color can be shared and can reach a wider public without depending on a well-established group of editors or big publishing presses to become publicly recognized as artists. Furthermore, the online platform has allowed these artists to freely denounce the abuses and spread awareness about them, even though this reality proves how institutions, justice and even society as a collectivity have failed one again in bringing in this respect. On the brighter side, these predators that used to called themselves artists are paying with their careers on time, and the public is responding by neither tolerating nor supporting them nor their work anymore. In this sense, we can see how the Internet is changing our responses to abuse, fame and art. People are already tired of the same abusers getting away with crime nowadays, and the victims are not silent anymore.

On the artistic side, we must pay attention to the artists that still remain faithful to the *Alt Lit* original community, even though they may not identify themselves with that label anymore. What is true is that this new generation of writers are highly influenced by the Internet, who understand language in the same way that communication is produced through different social media, as well as new social and cultural experiences result from this highly globalized and technologized world in the XXI century. In order to understand this different, and probably separate, chapter in the *Alt Lit* history, I would like to take over a term which more clearly defines a group of women who belonged to the original community, and who still unconsciously conform a more feminist and consciously-gendered generation of young female writers: the *Alt [C]Lit*.

'Alt [C]Lit' is a term first used by Emmie Rae (2014) at an article she wrote for the online magazine *The Lifted Brow*, commenting on Sophia Katz's non-fiction narrative *We Don't Have to Do Anything* about her experiences with the *Alt Lit* community and sexual abuse. Rae criticizes the

Alt Lit male members for employing their position and power inside the community to take advantage and abuse their female counterparts. She also reflects on how sexism is still rampant among younger generations and literary subcultures such as the so-called *Alt Lit*, whose major exponents, Tao Lin and Stephen Tully Dierks, have been accused of rape, abuse and previous sexist and even racists attitudes. By using the term *Alt [C]Lit*, she wants to claim how female authors can redeem the *Alt Lit* literary community and the whole movement from the sins performed by their male authors and transform it into an alternative vision on arts from a non-binary and inclusive perspective. When Rae introduces the '[C]' before 'Lit', she is consciously and simultaneously making an statement about literature, the margins, alterity, technology, authorship and women, and how these six elements intersect in this so called alternative vision on literature: 'Clit' can be either interpreted as 'clitoris' or the sound 'clicking' that makes the mouse or the keyboard of the computer when used to access a link at the Internet or any other content from our personal computers.

The poetry of *Alt [C]Lit* female writers is intertwined with sexual politics: the poets I have selected for this thesis inhabit sexed and sexual bodies, who wander in, out and in-between the realms of the real and the virtual. For this reason, I have chosen a wide sample of female authors who are as diverse between them as well as highly remarkable because of their styles, the imagery they use, and their experiences and thoughts presented in their writings. For the purpose of this Thesis, I would like to focus on their poetic production because of their linguistic and visual playfulness, and their direct connection to the Internet culture. The artists which are selected for this comparative research work are Melissa Broder, Alexandra Sarah Jean, Ana Carrete, Gabby Bess and Mira Gonzalez, all of them born approximately between 1980 and 1992, respectively. In the following chapters, I will explore a series of diverse topics through comparing and analyzing their poetic works in order to find the similarities and differences in what I consider them to be an essential part of the *Alt [C]Lit* community.

Chapter 2. The (voi)ces of a Girl-eration: @)LiVe of *Alt [C]Lit* writing

‘I think that I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least a voice. Of a generation.’
Hannah Horvath, *Girls HBO* (Dunham 2012, season 1, episode 1)

Maybe I have flown too far, Sibila tells herself before shaking her head and coming back to reality. Then she realises that her back is stooped over the desktop, her buttocks squashed over the chair and the tip of one of her index fingers over a keyboard, “period”, I think. (Zafra 2018, 142)²²

We live in an era more involved in writing than any other era before. Writing is no longer only accessible to the educated and the privileged or to writers, it is no longer a task limited to the production of letters, literature, or any other clerk-related task. Due to the rapid spread of social networks and media, people are using more the textual and written modes that allow them to communicate with each other rather than using the more conventional medium, such as the oral one. How could this be possible, when telephone dialing still exists and is even free, thanks to the introduction of face-time apps available for both phones and computers? There is still an appealing aspect to be found in the written word that attracts the younger generations more than ever, despite the fact that oral communication is easier to access and cheaper to use than it has ever been before.

Some people suggest that this phenomenon is nothing to be proud of, since the proliferation of personal writing, particularly produced by compulsive phone-texting and online posts, can be considered a chronic symptom of the over-production and saturation of communication, the so called-evil of *hypercommunication*: there is production, but barely any content worth of value or remarkable linguistic sign, to use Barthes’ terminology. There is a sense of speed in the infinite production of these ephemeral texts, which constantly flood the newsfeeds of our social media or collapses the un-read messages we receive through instant messaging platforms. This over-production saturates meaning, or its lack of. Writing has become the epitome of a social performance, through which we believe that we are more connected to others than ever. But the truth might be slightly different from a sociological perspective. In this chapter, I’m going to discuss the implications of the Internet in relation to women’s newest creative productions, especially concerning those poetic texts produced for an online-oriented audience.

²² The **Spanish original** quote reads: “Quizás he volado demasiado lejos”, se dice Sibila antes de agitar su cabeza y recuperar la noción de la realidad. Toma entonces conciencia de su espalda encorvada hacia la mesa, sus nalgas aplastadas sobre el asiento de la silla y la yema de uno de sus dedos índices apoyada sobre una tecla, “punto”, creo. (My translation)

2.1. Weavers, Spinners and Looms: (Web)analogies of Women's Text-making

[...] text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web [...] (Showalter, *Piecing and Writing*, 1986, 224)

The painting made by Remedios Varo *Embroidering the Earth's mantle* (1961)²³ presents to the viewer a group of young women weaving under the supervision of a religious figure, who seems to be dictating them what they have to do: but, according to Varo's own words (Gruen 2008, 119), there is a rebel girl who is weaving an image in which she meets her lover outside the walls' limits of the isolating convent, defying this way the words of the Great (She)Master, who is preaching the catechism. For centuries, weaving has been associated to women's act of writing by many critics. In *The Stateman*, Socrates claimed that "the art of composition" is similar to that one of "the working of wool forms a web", which is configured by a "regular intertexture of warp and woof" that results into a "woolen garment" (Plato 2018) What he calls the "art of weaving" is a metaphor for the linguistic production that illustrates the co-relation between "act, instrument, and woven material" to that other one of "naming, the name itself and the name's reference in the world." (Kenaan 2008, 162) Applying this interpretation of weaving to a narrative context, the implicit mechanic repetition of patterns implied in both weaving and storytelling creates a sense of continuity, an eternal loop, that perfectly works in order to register tradition, collective memory and the transmission of values as well as the stories of a determined culture. Traditionally, the figure of the spinster personifies this analogy between weaving and storytelling, as Mary Daly describes in the following passage from *Gyn-ecology*:



REMEDIOS VARO'S *EMBROIDERING THE EARTH'S MANTLE* (1961)

Spinsters spin and weave, mending and creating unity of consciousness. In doing so we spin through and beyond the realm of multiply split unconsciousness. In concealed workshops, Spinsters unsnarl, unknot, untie, unweave. We knit, know, interlace, entwine, whirl, and twirl. Absorbed in Spinning, in the ludic celebration which is both work and play, Spinsters span the dichotomies of false consciousness and break its mindbinding combinations (Daly 1978, 386)

²³The original title in Spanish is *Bordando el Manto Celeste*.

Similarly to Daly, Walter Benjamin explains in *The Storyteller* how “the art of repeating stories” can be compared to that of “the nature of the web”, suggesting that the storyteller becomes a spider who cradles a story in which listeners are kept captive, fascinated by the rhythm of the narrative, which is “impressed upon (their) memory” (Benjamin 2006, 364). Mother Goose, the storyteller figure popularized in the collection of Perrault’s tales, becomes the characterization of the juncture between these ideas, since she is usually presented spinning while telling her stories to an audience of children. As Tatar suggests, “the presence of the spindle reminds us that one of the favored sites for telling folktales was the workroom or *Spinsstube*, where spinning yarn helped to while away the hours devoted to spinning flax.” (Tatar 1987, 113) In this way, the relationship that is established between storyteller and listener(s) becomes an unconscious pact in which the storyteller guides the listener(s) through a series of imaginative paths of narrative, evoking alternative experiences and emotions that roots into the individual’s unconsciousness and then becomes part of the cultural memory that is transmitted through diverse media: from the oral, to the loom, to the print, and more recently, to the World Wide Web. This last one becomes the perfect metaphor that embodies it by recalling all these parallelisms already established between spinning, weaving, storytelling and the transmission of information nowadays, and by also paying homage to women’s craft as cultural transmitters of our immaterial heritage, making tangible what is elusive. In her collection of essays *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich makes a more explicit allusion to the way in which myths have configured and reinforced this intimate connection between weaving, creation, and womanhood:

If the pot, or vessel, was associated with the woman’s body, the conversion of raw fibers into the thread was connected with power over life and death; the spider who spins thread out of her own body, Ariadne providing the clue to the labyrinth, the figure of the Fates or Norns or old spinning-women who cut the thread of life or spin it further, are all associated with this process. (Rich 1986, 101)

Hence it is not strange to establish such parallelism between both activities, since women’s creative task has been traditionally constrained to that of weaving and embroidering in most cultures for a long time. Many goddesses have been depicted being related to the activities of spinning and weaving as symbols of genuine femininity, due to the intimate connection between these tasks with those attributed to women since Antiquity in many different myths throughout centuries. Examples of this are different primal goddesses, such as Frigg and her distaff in Norse



**MOTHER GOOSE
REPRESENTATION;
FRONTISPIECE FROM
THE ONLY KNOWN
COPY OF THE FIRST
ENGLISH
TRANSLATION, 1729.**

mythology or Leto, or Latona, and her Golden Spindle from the Greek and Roman ones, who are often represented with a spindle: both are mainly known as maternal figures, whose stories are strongly related to the activities of weaving and procreation. Similar representations of femininity, weaving and spinning can be found in other cultures around the world: Shinto goddess Amaterasu; Brigantia from Celtic mythology; the Mayan goddess Ixchel in Isla Mujeres or, from the Mayan myth of the Spider Woman, Teotihuacan; Mama Ocello from Incan myths; Beber goddess Tanit; Balkanic goddess Saule; Semitic goddess Astarte; Baltic goddess Saile, Finnish goddess Paivatar; Egyptian goddesses Isis, Neith and Nit, in whose cultures men were usually the weavers rather than women; the Grandmother Spider Woman from different Native American stories. The Germanic goddesses Holda and Perchta's presences still resonate in many tales and the legends that inspired them, most of them collected by the Grimm Brothers during the XIX century. All these deities were closely connected not only to the tasks of spinning and weaving, which symbolize the essence of femininity, domesticity and fertility, but they were also related to other unexpected areas, traditionally associated to men, like war. Also, they were connected to the Moon and the Sun, symbols of divinity since Ancient times, and which set the grounds for the cosmological configuration and vision of all civilizations in the past until the present days.

2.1.1. Tapestries of the Past: narrating women's experience(s)

Just taking a brief look into the Ancient Greece, we find that Pallas Athena, Minerva in the Roman tradition, one of the most important deities in the Mount Olympus, was considered to be the patron of weavers. In the Greek tradition, we find countless accounts, both written and visual, about women's intimate connection to this textual form and genuine form of narrative, as an alternative medium to that of paper allowed for women to express their creativity upon. In a strict patriarchal system in which women passed from fathers to husbands through tutelage, unable to decide by themselves, weaving conformed a way for expressing their hopes and feelings through the looms and tapestries they crafted while they were 'waiting' for their husbands' return from their public affairs, as Pantelia suggests: "From a position of power and security, they are able to redirect their energies towards others by producing the thread, that is, the material other women may use in order to "weave" their own lives." (Pantelia 1993, 500) On the other hand, Plant examines the original intentions attributed to women and weaving by suggesting that weaving was not considered a creative task that allowed women from the past to speak for themselves, but it was rather a coping mechanism to keep them quiet and busy inside the contemplative safety of their household chores:

If weaving was to count as an achievement, it was not even one of women's own. Their work is not original or creative: both the women and their cloths are simply copying the matted tangles of pubic hair. [...] She is bound to weave a costume for the masquerade: she is an actress, a mimic, an impersonator, with no authenticity underneath it all. She has nothing to reveal, no soul to bare, not even a sex or a self to please. He pulls aside the veils, the webs of lies, the shrouds of mystery, and the layers of deception and duplicity, and finds no comfort, no there there. Only "the horror of nothing to be seen." (Plant 1998, 24-25)

So it is not that rare that women's creativity has been always put into question by denigrating their artistic production to the mere mechanism of (re)producing or copying what can be



PENELOPE SEATED IN FRONT OF HER LOOM AND NEXT TO HER SON TELEMACHUS, SECOND HALF OF THE FIFTH CENTURY B.C.E.

found in nature, as if male artists did not use this form of production themselves. From Penelope's eternal weaving-and-unweaving of her father-in-law's funeral shroud in order to avoid her suitors while waiting for her husband Odysseus, Helen's carding wool and offering her self-made robe to Telemachus, Circe is weaving a divine tapestry, and so Calypso weaves while singing merrily ... In this respect, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are populated with multiple examples in which women are constantly depicted as productive weavers inside the safety and comfort of their houses while men are making war and destructing around. This reference can be found in the

fifth book of *The Iliad*, from verses 489 to 493, when the Trojan hero Hector tells his wife Andromache the following words as a farewell before departing towards war: "Go home, and attend to your tasks, the loom and spindle, and see the maids work hard. War is a man's concern, the business of every man in Ilium, and mine above all." (Homer 2009, 440-493) The implicit domestication of the arts of spinning, weaving, and embroidering are attributed as typically feminine tasks that are also associated to reiteration, mobility, temporality, precision, focus and creativity, as Dalton Palomo suggests:

Spinning and weaving are works performed inside the house. Repetitive works that are transformed into mobile and perishable materials. Embroidering is a more delicate task which requires concentration and manual care, especially if it is a tapestry where the scene of a great activity is presented. The way in which the

feminine is presented related to the activity of spinning, weaving and embroidering is the making in the interior space. (Dalton Palomo 1996, 99)²⁴

In other examples, we find the clever Ariadne helping, and even saving, Theseus from the Minotaur by leaving her magical thread throughout the Minoan Labyrinth. Another important thread found in Greek mythology is the one used by the Moirai, or the Parcae in the Roman tradition: the sinister trio of women who spin the thread of our mortal existence from birth till death. They are usually depicted using a spinning wheel, each of them representing a different stage in life: Clotho, who spins, and so begins, the thread; Lachesis, who draws out and determines our destinies; and Atropos, the one who cuts the thread, and therefore decides when our end comes. These sinister figures, mostly associated to death and tragedy, can be found in many faerie tales from many European and Latin American countries with diverse narrative variations. In the Chinese tradition, it is said that the empress Leizu, or Xi Lingshi, who was the wife of the legendary Yellow Emperor during



THE THREE MOIRAI, OR THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH, FLEMISH TAPESTRY C. 1520.

the 3rd millenium BC, was the one who first discovered silk production as mere accident, according to different versions: by touching a silkworm cocoon and thus making a filament come loose, wrapping it around her finger; or by dropping a cocoon into her cup of tea, resulting into a string



COURT LADIES PREPARING NEWLY-WOVEN SILK, C. 12TH CENTURY.

from the cocoon to loosen. In any case, she is also attributed the invention of the silk reel and the silk loom, through which silk threads and silk clothing were produced (Mingren 2016) In Japan, we have the tragic figure of the weaving princess Orihime, whose story was inspired by an ancient Chinese tale called *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*. Both versions depict the tragic story of two lovers who were punished by the Jade Emperor for not committing to their tasks by being distracted by their love: a moral tale about hard work, commitment, and love. By neglecting her looming, Orihime is separated from her lover Hikoboshi, only to be able to meet each other on the 7th of July once a year, when a river made of stars allows them to meet. As a result of this myth, Japanese people celebrate the *Tanabata* Festivities, in which

²⁴ *Hilar y tejer son trabajos dentro de la casa. Trabajos repetitivos que se transforman en materiales móviles y perecederos. El bordar es una tarea más delicada que requiere concentración y esmero manual, especialmente si es un tapiz donde se presenta una escena de gran actividad. El modo en que se presenta lo femenino relacionado con la actividad de hilar, tejer y bordar es el hacer en el espacio interior.* (My translation)

strings of colored papers with inscribed wishes are hanged from bamboo branches next to a river during the night in order to celebrate the reunion of the two separated lovers. Therefore, not only Western tales and myths connect the fates of women intimately to textile doings, but it seems to be a common cultural gendered pattern that is repeated in very diverse and different socio-cultural backgrounds around the globe.

Many other legends revolve around the idea of punishment associated to women and weaving. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the boastful Arachne is challenged by Athena into a weaving contest and is punished by the goddess after winning by being transformed into a spider, condemned to weave an eternal web. In another of Ovid's stories, Philomena weaves a tapestry depicting her rape story at the hands of Tereus, after having her tongue cut, in order to tell her sister Procne and seek out revenge. Out of jealousy, the Old Evil Fairy spells a curse upon the princess in *The Sleeping Beauty* by stating "that the princess should prick her hand with a spindle, and



THE SPINNERS OR THE FABLE OF ARACHNE
BY DIEGO DE VELAZQUEZ, 1675.



I AM HALF-SICK OF
SHADOWS, SAID THE LADY
OF SHALOTT BY J. W.
WATERHOUSE, 1915.

die of it" (Perrault 2003), crafting a symbolic death that has been interpreted as an allegory for sexual awakening and maturity. Throughout the XIX, it can be found in many of the tales collected by the Grimm Brothers how spinning is used as symbolic device used to save someone from a curse, like it happens in *The Six Swans*, or to make the heroine marry with a prince or king, like in *Rumpelstiltskin* or *Spindle, Shuttle, and Needle*, since the ability to spin and weave were desirable traits that made any woman worthy for marriage; otherwise she would become a spinster. In Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* (1832), a woman is being kept captive in a tower where she is forbidden from directly looking towards Camelot except throughout her magic mirror, from which she is

inspired to weave her tapestries during the time of her wait:

Before her hangs a mirror clear,
Reflecting tower'd Camelot.
And as the mazy web she whirls, [...]
But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights, [...] (Tennyson, 2018)

2.1.2. Patch[ing] the Kn0t: @merica's tradition of community b0nding

In the Anglo-American tradition, one finds that the quilt has been transformed into the embodiment of community binding, as once Winthrop stated in his famous speech *City Upon the Hill* (1630): “wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion [...]” (Winthrop 2018); where he encourages this the unity of the group to become an example for the rest, as “the eies of all people are uppon us” (Winthrop, 2018); especially for God, being under constant mundane and divine surveillance: a characteristic that seems to fit the paranoid character of the US society even nowadays, which will be discussed later in more depth in this thesis. Throughout the XIX century and a great part of the XX century, patchwork-quilting became a textile form popularized among US women. As Suzanne Shepard claims quilts, which are made out of different textile rags, can be considered a fictional representation that “highlights a community in which unique individuals are attracted to one another through common interests and affection – and thus tends to be more egalitarian and matriarchal” (Shepard 2001, 2). This vision contrasts to the widespread hierarchical structures imposed by the patriarchy of “interdependent sameness” (Shepard 2001, 2), which is promoted and encouraged by the Fathers of the Nation as an attempt to create social order through strict control of each member of a culture. As Showalter argues, “American quilt-making crossed racial, regional, and class boundaries, and its immense aesthetic vitality came from its fertilization by other design traditions” (Showalter 1991, 148). Therefore, the quilt symbolizes the diversity in the configuration of the US nation, becoming influenced by different backgrounds which covers from English, West African, Navaho, Sioux, Amish, Mennonite, and Hawaiian (Showalter 1991, 149) influences over textile crafting.

The patchwork-quilt as a metaphor for storytelling becomes a plot device and narrative tool for structuring it in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, where the Canadian author transformed the story of convicted Canadian murderess-maid Grace Marks into fiction by creating a narrative through the fictionalized encounters of the protagonist with a physician interested in psychology and crime. The narrative is developed through the compilation of historical documentation which has been preserved from the real case, and which Atwood had to “select, eliminate, order, assemble and fill in absences” with fiction. By resembling the process of patch-working, Atwood imitated the “reflexive process of deconstructing narrative strategies” (Murray 2001, 71) to rewrite this

particular story from a contemporary perspective. The metaphor becomes so important in order to understand the meaning that the novel conveys that the protagonist is described creating her own



STILL FROM *ALIAS GRACE*, EPISODE 6,
2017.

quilt throughout the meeting sessions with doctor Jordan, reinforcing this sense of quilt-storytelling twice: by sewing and by telling her story, which is double checked by Jordan through her criminal records. In the cinematographic adaptation of the book is more evident once the Grace herself hangs the finished quilt for the viewer to see at the end of the show, once she has been released from prison and starts her

new life as a married woman. The importance of the quilt in both the novel and the series is that Grace does not allow anyone to write her story but the one she is crafting in the quilt, which is full of symbols open to the interpretation of those who dare to dig into the depths of the psyche, and even her past.

For African-Americans, black slave women helped white women with the tasks of spinning, weaving, sewing and quilting for wealthy families at plantations, and after the Emancipation Amendment, they were hired as domestic employees in different households and little farms (Breneman 2001). There are some critics, such as Barkley Brown, who argue that the patterns employed in African-American quilts differ from the ones employed in the Euro-American tradition, which created symmetrical patterns through the production of diverse forms. Whereas the African-American ones are based on the aesthetics of *polyrhythms*, “creating the impression of several patterns moving in different directions or multiple rhythms within the context of a controlled design” (Barkley Brown 1989, 923-924), that is a prominent characteristic in African-American dance, music and language as well. In the XIX, Harriet Powers, a notorious African-American slave and quilt artist from the South, used patch-working in order to record local stories, illustrate Bible passages, and other events of her time on the quilts she made.



PICTORIAL QUILT BY HARRIET POWERS, C.
1895-98.

In the literary, the quilt is also used as a visual reminder of the past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which is turned into a narrative device that triggers memories and provides a structure through which the narrators offer their different perspectives and accounts about the story of *Beloved*, by shifting the narrative voice, and establishing differentiated parts in which the story is

organized (Barnes Daniel 2000) A similar use is employed by Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, in which the quilt made by Celie and Sofia symbolizes the union between both sisters, a filial bonding through which both characters attempt to make sense out of the chaos and adversities that they were enduring along their lives, especially Celie, around whom the narrative particularly focuses on: [...] the artistic pattern she chose to make herself anew out of the dispersed pieces of advice she had collected during her life, based on which she constructs her shattered self, and wins over her passivity and victimhood” (Bilali 2014, 6) Thus, it can be considered that quilting took over weaving and spinning, since these activities were substituted by more precise and faster machines during the Industrialization period. The tradition of textile domesticity continued through the quilt, which women used to tell their stories and even reconstructed their identities in the intimacy and solitude of their lives at the time, as Showalter points out as well in the following analogy:

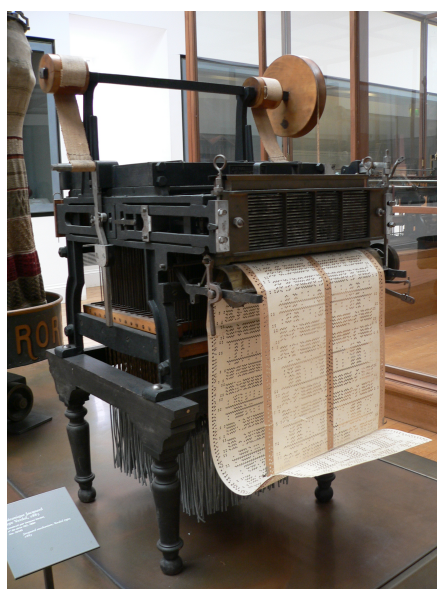
Piecing is this an art of making do and eking out, an art of ingenuity, and conservation. It reflects the fragmentation of women’s time, the scrappiness and uncertainty of women’s creative or solitary moments. (Showalter 1986, 228)

Since the invention of automatic machines, the way narratives and storytelling are related symbolically to weaving and crafting have slightly changed, especially since the sudden appearance and extended use of the personal computers in our daily lives. From handcrafting to industrial machines, the processes of weaving and looming started to become more and more complex, precise and laborious, turning textile patterns into mass, even repetitive, productions.

2.1.3. Comput[ing] the L00m: the Origins of the World Wide Web

During the Industrial revolution, the labor of these women became mediated by technology through the introduction of automatic looms, which forced many women to join textile fabrics and leave the domestic sphere: a factor that became a turning point in transforming women’s place in the workforce in Western countries. These monstrous machines, such as the *Jacquard Loom*, fascinated and inspired mathematicians and engineers of that time, such as Ada Lovelace, the mother of programming and the pioneer of computer sciences: she dedicated over a year to study and research the workings of such magnificent device. In her research notes, Lovelace speculated about the possibility of combining the punched cards of the *Jacquard Loom* to the Babbage’s Analytical Engine in order to repeat certain operations and produce more complex ones, by “breaking the linearity and diversifying the options between the ones which were already

planned” (Zafra 2013, 104)²⁵, which has been the basis from which computer sciences were originated. The parallelism between computational mathematics and the inspiration coming from the industrial weaving looms is beautifully stated by Lovelace in the following fragment belonging to her personal notes: “[...] the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves.” (Spuybroek 2011, 53) Following this logic, it seems that the *Jacquard Loom*’s use of exchangeable *punched cards* allowed the control of a series of operations that were the first precedents to the ones used in a computer’s hardware, and which originated the development in the coming centuries for the technological



JACQUARD LOOM WITH PUNCHED CARDS.

advances that are currently applied to our modern laptops, since *punched cards* usually employs a series of arithmetic operations which were used to control automated machines directly. During the 1990s, Sadie Plant revisited this theoretical framework of how weaving machines and computers are not only intimately related by the genealogical thread of technology, but also by the automated and repeated structures that configures weaving, writing and typing as mechanical processes clearly associated to feminine activities of re-production:

In and out of the punched holes of automated looms, up and down through the ages of spinning and weaving, back and forth through the fabrication of fabrics, shuttles and looms, cotton and silk, canvas and paper, brushes and pens, typewriters, carriages, telephone wires, synthetic fibers, electrical filaments, silicon strands, fiber-optic cables, pixelated screens, telecom lines, the World Wide Web, the Net, and matrices to come. (Plant 1998, 12)

After the automatization of weaving looms and the apparition of the type writer at the end of the XIX century and its widespread incorporation to the workplace throughout the XX century, women’s labor productivity was transferred from the weaving fabrics onto the offices for the following decades, up until our times. As many suggests, the introduction of this new device into the process of writing and elements of composition, such as “the breath, the pauses, the suspension, even, of syllables, the juxtaposition, even, of parts of phrases” (McLuhan 1965, 259), have been affected and much influenced the way writers and poets produced their literary works, as McLuhan himself claims: “As expediter, the typewriter brought writing and speech and publication into close association. Although a merely mechanical form, it acted in some respects as an implosion, rather

[...] rompiendo la literalidad y diversificando las opciones entre las cuales ya están panificadas. (My translation)

than an explosion.” (McLuhan 1965, 262) Again, the connection between repetition, copying and these traditional feminine attributes facilitated the incorporation of women into white-collar jobs such as secretaries, copy typists, shorthand typists, audio typists, and so forth. As Zafra suggests in her book *(h)adas*, these associations have served to make use of women’s subordinate work and to leave the creative part to men, whereas women’s task is relegated to those activities that are more mechanical and less artistic, as mere intermediaries in the chain of creative-work production: minor tasks are also associated to minor and secondary actions subordinated to the major ones, also directed and supervised by the one’s done by men. Therefore, typing became a substitute for writing, a task which was mediated by the transmission of the information instead of the creation of art, silencing women’s voices through the imposition of labor productivity, turning women into devices who type words mechanically:

Typing is a word which evokes fingers and machines, eyes and screen. By the typist has to do with something ancient, it sounds like a pre-electronic mechanic machine, I would say that it is a word in black and white, not lacking a body and materiality, illustrated as lines of women sitting in front of their type writers typing on them, dedicated to the task of “copying”; looking, typing, typing, looking, typing, looking; transcribing messages, making themselves as mediators through the copy who translates, manages and distributes information. (Zafra 2013, 203)²⁶

Returning to the artistic and literary realm of production, these days many female artists keep on trying to tie the knot between the traditional and the contemporary by experimenting with the materiality of textiles, the creative bonding of narratives and the technological possibilities of digital formats. Recently, a great example of this combination is Peruvian multimedia artist Francesca Rodriguez Sawaya. Her spectacular technological and artistic project consists on materializing oral history and creative coding through the weaving patterns of knots²⁷. Inspired by *Quipu*, the Incan method for archiving information through strings of knots, she decided to reconnect with her own Quechuan roots by creating a project that collects oral stories of Peruvian immigrants



QUIPU PRESENTATION IN *FIRST NEW CHRONICLE AND GOOD GOVERNMENT* BY GUAMÁN POMA DE AYALA, 1615.

²⁶ Teclear es una palabra que evoca dedos y máquinas, ojos y pantalla. Pero la tecleadora tiene algo de antiguo, suena a máquina mecánica pre-electrónica, diría que es una palabra en blanco y negro, no carente de cuerpo y materialidad, ilustrada como filas de mujeres sentadas frente a sus máquinas de escribir tecleando en ellas, dedicadas a la tarea de la “copia”; mirar, teclear, teclear, mirar, teclear, mirar; transcribiendo mensajes, haciendo de mediadoras a través de la copia que traduce, gestiona y distribuye información. (Zafra 2013, 203)

²⁷ *Texere* by Francesca Rodriguez Sawaya (2017): <http://www.franrodriguezsawaya.com/#/texere/>

in the city of New York, who were also native speakers of Quechua, one of the native languages



PRESENTATION OF TEXERE BY FRANCESCA RODRÍQUEZ SAWAYA (2017)

spoken in the Andes. She claims that there is a direct relation between traditional looms and computers, since weaving was one of the many forms through which cultures “have kept information for so many years.” (Heggstad 6th March 2018, *hastac*) The pattern of the woven pieces was determined by audio clips which recorded the testimonies of those who migrated, which Sawaya translated into a loom pattern,

“based on the analysis of frequency, amplitude, volume and mainly pauses” (Heggstad 6th March 2018, *hastac*). The visual impact of crossing threads of different colors, superimposing each other conforming a pattern emphasizes the importance of “the way things were said” (Heggstad 6th March 2018, *hastac*), whereas the physical interface created by the conductivity of the thread establishes a multimodal experience by activating the tracks through direct touch. Sawaya confesses that this idea was inspired by Frida Kahlo’s painting *What the water gave me* (1938)²⁸, in which Kahlo presented a visual memoir of her own life by connecting through threads various images belonging to memories of her family, tragic and joyous moments of her life as well as the depiction of Mexican iconography, myths and other symbols: the metaphor of life is represented by a web of interpersonal and intercultural experiences that configures ²⁹individual identity.



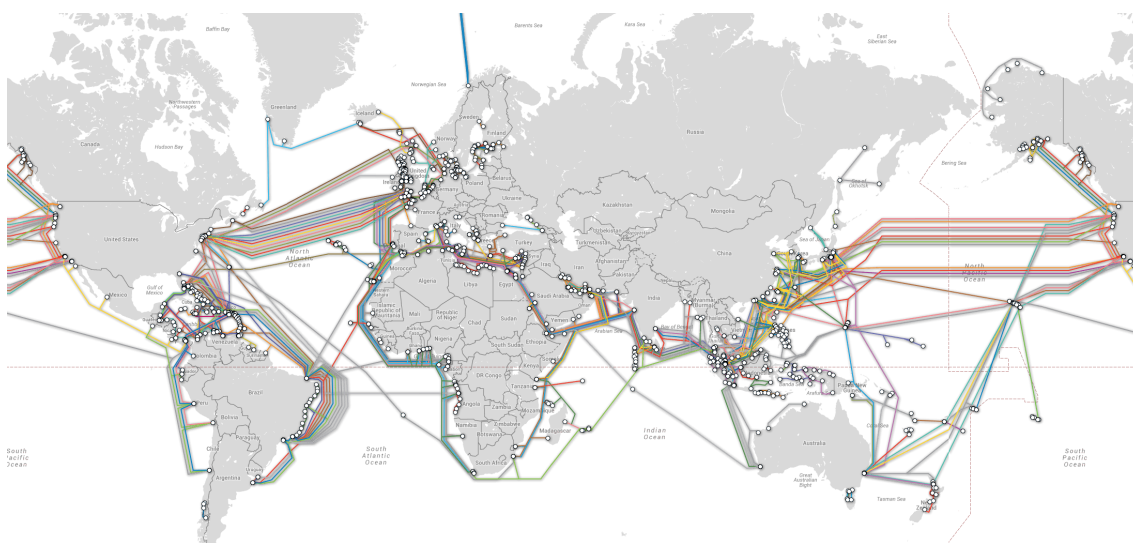
WHAT THE WATER GAVE ME BY FRIDA KAHLO, 1938.

At this very moment, most women writers populate the Internet as a horde of cyber-spiders who constantly, 24-hours and all year along, non-stop, weave and spin their texts throughout the Net, hunting readers through their sticky web(s) like prey. I would like my readers to keep this image in mind, since I shall develop this idea further in in-coming sections of this Thesis. By researching these genealogical links and connections between contemporary women and their fellow counterparts from the past, we can conclude that by pulling the thread of some of these

²⁸ The original title in Spanish is *Lo que el agua me dio*.

²⁹ <https://www.submarinicablemap.com/>

anthropological roots, we have discovered further unexpected connections throughout, and not only, but also between disparate cultures across the globe. If this was not the original intention, we cannot still ignore the fact that the intricacies of the Big Web that constitute our socio-cultural legacy makes more than evident that the Internet, and more concretely, online writing, is the legitimate heir(ess) and successor(ess) of those (wo)men who span, weaved, knotted, and embroidered their stories, their narratives, their experiences, their emotions into the loom of history, literature and the arts. Nowadays, the Titanic Cybernetic Loom that constitutes the World Wide Web attempts to continue reproducing these complex patterns about life through different languages, visuals and media that still makes us human: our (Her)(His)(Their)(Our)tories.



MAP OF THE UNDERWATER CABLES THAT SUPPLY THE WORLD INTERNET

2.2. Typing and [C]licking: Craft(ing) a narrative of one's own

To the women who use machines for weaving, producing, programming, *presuming*, typing, de-construct and imagining their works, their things and lives through technology, we will call them “adas” or “(h)adas” (fairies). They do not hide the “adas” a clear homage to Ada Byron. (Zafra, (2013, 47)³⁰

From the echoes at the previous section, the wooden sounds of the primitive looms, the rusty sounds of the *Jacquard Loom*, the clickety-clack of the typing machine to the soft tapping our fingers make on the keyboards of our savvy computers, creative works have changed drastically in the last two decades. The autonomy and self-management provided by the newest technologies have also transformed the concept of working professionally in most cases: the productivity rates of those white-collar jobs from the past have been exponentially increased, and even, some of them have

³⁰ A las mujeres que manejan máquinas para tejer, producir, programar, *prosumir*, teclear, desmontar e imaginar sus trabajos, sus cosas y vidas a través de las tecnologías, las llamaremos “adas” o “(h)adas”. No ocultan las adas un claro homenaje a Ada Byron. (My translation)

been relocated from offices in specific buildings in the metropolitan areas of the major cities, to alternative spaces through remote work due to the constant connectivity and availability provided by the expansion of Wifi areas worldwide. As Zafra describes in her book *(h)adas*, there is a trend on reducing the costs of labour by a reconceptualizing the monetization



HANNAH HORVART TYPING ON HER LAPTOP IN *GIRLS*
HBO, EPISODE 1, SEASON 6, 2017.

and commercialization of work due to the introduction of technologies, which makes it cheaper and easier to produce. This word comes from the combination of the verbs *to produce* and *to consume*, and it is closely associated to practices of the *do it yourself*, as Zafra perfectly describes in the following passage:

In a cultural context, *prosuming* also implies a change of status of the *consumer of symbols*. The subject is not any longer a passive subject who reads, listens and assimilates information but (she) builds, manipulates, takes over and re-signifies it in a transformative frame of the receptive and the access forms to symbols (in its informational, cognitive and other facet) encouraged by the networks and more recent technologies of daily use. (Zafra 2013, 125)³¹

For Zafra, typing equates to the paradoxically similar processes of copying and creating, which are intimately connected by forms of subjetivization and identity formation through the intervention of technology (Zafra 2013, 198). In the case of Melissa Broder, her collection of self-reflective essays *So Sad Today* reflects how the Internet has shaped, and even mixed, the concepts of *loneliness* and *presuming*. Both of them tend to mix and even overlap due to the virtualization of social relations as well as the dis-connection offered by the architectonical configuration of modern cities around the world, which leads towards an individualism that isolates and constrains us towards our inner selves. In this confessional book of auto-fictional essays, Broder describes that her problems at work pushed her to create her famous *Twitter* account, *@sosadtoday*³², from which she tweeted about her depressive states anonymously. She quickly found the relieving effects about venting online: “[...] there was something about the visceral impact of sending what I was feeling out into the universe that felt different than just writing a journal. It gave me relief. Maybe it was

³¹ En el ámbito de la cultura, el *prosumo* implica también un cambio del estatuto del *consumidor de símbolos*. El sujeto no es ya un sujeto pasivo que lee, escucha y asimila información sino que la construye, manipula, apropia y resignifica en un marco de transformación de las formas de recepción y acceso a los símbolos (en su faceta informacional, cognoscitiva y otra) incentivado por las redes y las más recientes tecnologías de uso cotidiano. (My translation)

³² *So Sad Today* Official *Twitter* account link: <https://twitter.com/sosadtoday?lang=es>

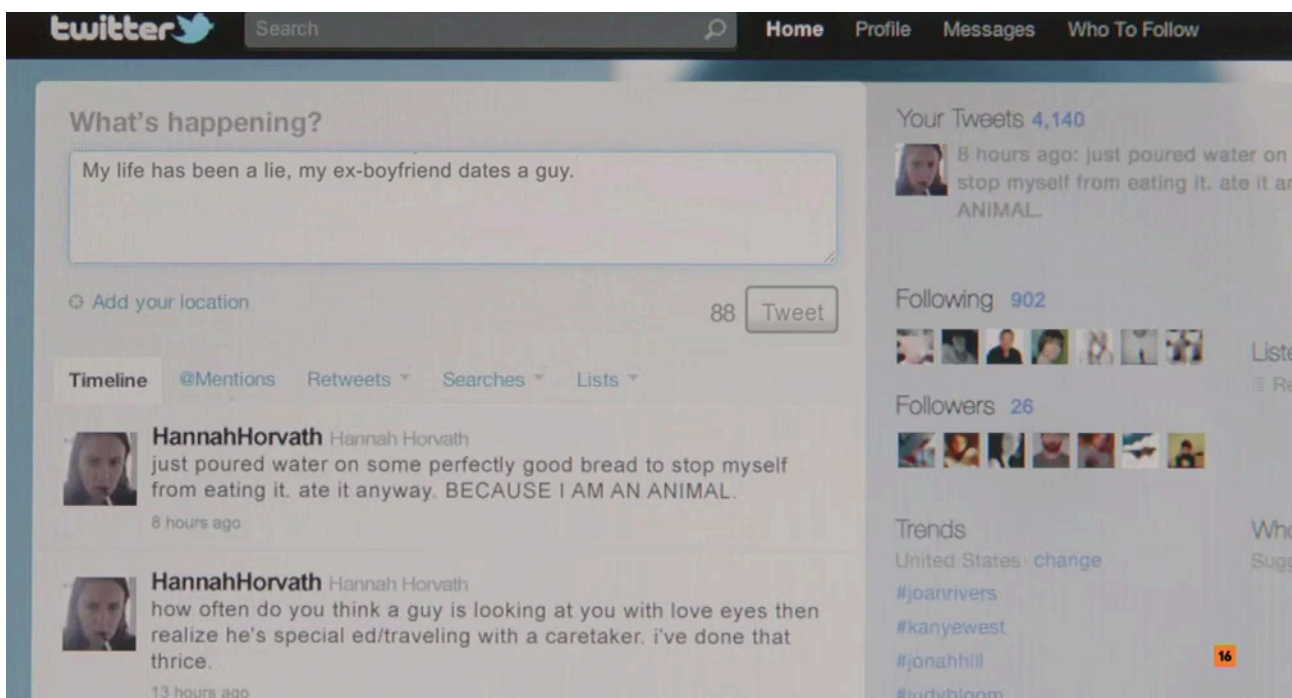
just the dopamine of hitting send, but I felt like things were starting to move and clear out of me.” (Broder 2015, 210) In an interview for *The Guardian*, Broder also developed this idea about tweeting on mental health as the form through which she could cope with her depression creatively:

I’ve always been self-reflective and able to verbalise my internal life. But in terms of actually feeling the feelings, I’m definitely no better. Writing for me is a healthy form of escapism, a way of synthesising all this stuff. And I think tweeting is a way of chemically altering myself by getting that hit of dopamine. (Bromwich 8th May 2016, *The Guardian*)

This new wave of online confessionalism is well aware of the possibilities of creating an audience who would identify with whatever content one may create in the Internet. The projection of a part of oneself into the creation of a confessional alter-ego seems a liberating, and even frivolous, form of therapy through which to mediate with our selves, especially our negative side, as Mlotek writes on *The New Yorker* analyzing Broder’s work: “One way to fend off isolation is to confess. Works of confessional writing, especially those written by and for women, are as much an attempt to connect as a way to unload [...]” (Mlotek 14th March 2016, *The New Yorker*) It seems that this strategy is employed in order to make one feel less ‘lonely’ despite the lack of emotional depth and connection with the people one interacts, directly or indirectly, through the net. This is also suggested by Beaton, a specialist in Millennial culture and psychology, in an article at *Forbes*: “Ironically, we use the Internet to alleviate our loneliness. [...] The Internet temporarily enhances the social satisfaction and behavior of lonely introvert people, who are more likely to go online when they feel isolated, depressed or anxious.” (Beaton 8th February 2017, *Forbes*) Hence, Broder uses anonymity to express what she would have felt unable to do if her identity was revealed, for fear of being easily targeted and judged by criticism. Creating this *online persona*, in the way *avatars* populated the web during the early 2000s, allowed her to engage with other people without intimately or personally committing, as she describes this paradoxical tension between longing and avoiding social companionship in *So Sad Today*:

I would rather be on the Internet engaging with half-imaginary people in a fake way than in real life engaging with real people in a real way. [...] This is maybe because real people aren’t pixelated. Their mistakes and annoyingness can’t be repurposed into a fantasy. I actually have to see the real people and be seen by them. If people never become real, it’s harder for them to disappoint you. That’s why the Internet is good for sad people. You can be with people without having to be with people. (Broder 2016a, 75)

Contemporary women's writing seems to be populated with examples of this new turn into confessionalism that has been revived by the increasing need of the Internet users to share and to connect with others in a manner that they are unable to do outside the virtual world. Fantasies and illusions are re-created through these pixelated idealizations, Broder suggests: people are well aware of these lies, this constant falsification, intended distortion that appears our *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter* feeds, but instead of being more critical about the origins of this denial of reality, one fully indulges oneself into them because it is easier to submit to lies than to questions them and confront the ugly truth behind. Living in an overwhelming reality that is difficult to change, the online world offers an alternative space by transforming it at our will thanks to the advances of diverse technologies. But in order to make these lies more attractive and less prone to induce into skepticism, they must at least resemble reality in order to be reliable, or at least, show a certain degree of that authenticity so longed by most *Alt Lit* writers, even if that authenticity is an idealized one.



HANNAH'S TWEETING IN *GIRLS HBO*, EPISODE 3, SEASON 1, 2012.

2.2.1. [Don't] Overshare it!: Twitter's (New) Confessionalism

The excess of fantasy disconnects people from reality to very extreme limits and that potentially produces rejection and avoidance towards it. That's why *autofiction* has become a popular literary and artistic form for displaying biographical experiences through the mixing boundaries between reality and fiction, since people are not looking for the ultimate truth of the

author. But, how that truth resembles their own unspoken, unwritten, and even unvisualized truth, has turned into a new popularized form of communication which is currently known as the phenomenon of *oversharing*. This new form of communication seems to be related to this trend that is associated to many female US authors, as the ones mentioned at Mlotek's article (March 24, 2016): Sheila Heti, Leslie Jamison, and Lena Dunham are examples of this raw and crude exposition of their particular visions on femininity and the inclusion of their personal experiences as women and writers in their works of fiction. Dunham herself has parodied this Millennial social trait in her show *Girls*, as it proves the caption of the main character of Hannah, intensely tweeting about personal misfortune in episode 3 from season 1, 'All Adventurous Women Do', which proves the soothing effects of ranting online in the same way Broder does in *So Sad Today*.

Rachel Sykes, lecturer in Contemporary American literature at the University of Birmingham, has written an article addressing the gendered implications and discrimination of *oversharing* that the critic reception has about contemporary women's writing, as "the revelation of "too much" personal information" (Sykes 2017, 151), since *oversharing* is a neologism used to describe the current phenomenological trends that challenge the social constructions that "divides the individual's public and private lives and highlights the threat to "contextual integrity"" (Sykes 2017, 156): that entails a violation of the sacred values of intimacy and privacy. Sykes also argues that this term has been used against contemporary female authors to reinforce a series of prejudices that dismisses and demonizes the literary and artistic value and accomplishments of women's creative work and its adaptability to the newest social and cultural trends:

[...] contemporary use of the term is steeped in all-too-familiar misogynies that privilege male subjectivity over female subjectivity and characterize female self-knowledge, and the public sharing of that knowledge, as in some way shameful. (Sykes 2017, 158)

But is the female writer of the XXI century a frivolous and lazy Millennial narcissist that overshares to get easy attention, without effort, by exposing her privacy as an empty aesthetics? Is it always writing about one's own life and personal experience a narcissist gesture or a political act whenever the artist is a woman? Dunham's, as Sykes explains, is a highly controversial case, particularly after the publication of her memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* in 2014, due to her honesty and self-centered tendencies in depicting personal, and also polemical, experiences and reflections about a generation of Millennial making their way into adulthood in New York city. Despite Dunham openly identifying with a liberal feminist position, she was harshly criticized for her privileged position as a white middle-class heterosexual woman, dismissing her achievements and

the value of her work as a matter of identity and racial privilege in the US society. Dunham, as the creator of successful HBO's *Girls*, depicts this continuous backlash and the social consequences of mixing the personal with professional success through public writing throughout the whole last season of the show³³, when she finally gets her dream job as a commissioned writer for a prestigious magazine after publishing a fictional account of how her ex-boyfriend cheated on her with her best friend. As Boyle herself stated in her interview, Dunham's alter ego in the show, Hannah, confesses that what she wanted to achieve through her writing is *to make people less alone* by sharing her personal experiences and connecting with her audience by exposing the naked truth of unspeakable intimacies and privacy, by being totally honest and vulnerable towards the world. Other critical voices positions against the continuous portrayal in fiction of women writing about themselves since this constrains women's creativity to the cliché of being unable to create outside their personal experiences, contrary to the cliché of abstract creativity quality with which their male counterparts are showed to possess. This is what Anna Leszkiewicz points out in the following article, where female writers are depicted as "writing their own lives, in real time", as if the only textual source for inspiration for them was only those of fictionalized-biographical facts:

But the male protagonists here are rarely defined by their writing ambitions, or even seen as writers at all until the final moments. Compare that with Hannah and Rory, whose entire identities are based on their desires to write, something they are incapable of doing without writing autobiographically. (Leszkiewicz 2017, *New Statesman*)

Apart from Broder, other explicit examples of how the *Alt [C]Lit* writers are inspired by their own life in order to experiment with creative and writing processes are Megan Boyle and Mira Gonzalez. Boyle mainly *live-blogged* her life in *Tumblr* for a few months in 2013: a book of her *Tumblr live-blogs* was released as a non-fiction collection in 2018 by *New York Tyrant*. The reason behind this book was to fix some issues about "self-discipline" and recording "entire consciousness in a document" (Plummer 11th October 2018, *The Creative Independent*), as Boyle herself confesses in interview for *The Creative Independent*. As Wallace reviews *Liveblog* in *The New Yorker*, Boyle exposes her vulnerable self through an online broadcasting "to anyone would care to read it" (Wallace 2018), and argues that Boyles' attempt to record and catalog her own life online shows the problematics and the limits of blogging as literature and as a contemporary attempt of *performative auto-fiction*, in the sense of how constant availability through blogging to the public eye makes us more vulnerable, and also, lonelier: "*Liveblog* is a new kind of story, about how we

³³ *Girls HBO* Season 6 Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ka5cBP0WYo>

arrange those lives for public inspection. It pushes that inspection to an extreme, in the hopes that, by choosing to give over everything, it might be possible, for a moment, to regain a sliver of agency.” (Wallace 2018) The narcissist seems to be nobody if there is not a voyeur ready to *click* on our private lives already available online from the other side of the screen. The constant longing to exist through online visibility: the virtual eyes that watches everything and make it *(a)live*. Apparently, this trend has been also taken into a performative staging of the act of writing by a group of artists from Barcelona, led



ESCRITURA EN VIVO BY MARCOS ZALABARDER.

by writer Marcos Xalabarder, who organizes a series of events known as *Live Writing*³⁴ (*Escritura en Vivo* in Spanish), and whose aim is to encourage the simultaneous interaction between writing and reading by bringing together the reader and the author into the same physical space:

We have that image in our minds of the writer as a solitary being who sits in front of their typing machine in the most absolute intimacy of a room of their own. We change the *Olivetti* typewriter for a *MacBook* and light is the only thing that changes. Isolation remains the same. Writing, unlike other artistic disciplines, is not usually shared *live* for an audience.[...] The spectacle of *Live Writing* has gathered two hundred people around a big screen. On this one, the text is been projected at the same time that it is being written. You attend to witness the errors of the finger, to the contradictions and also, to the magic of a story well spin with only three key elements and three minutes to improvise. (Osegura 20th October 2018, *Ocult Lit*)³⁵

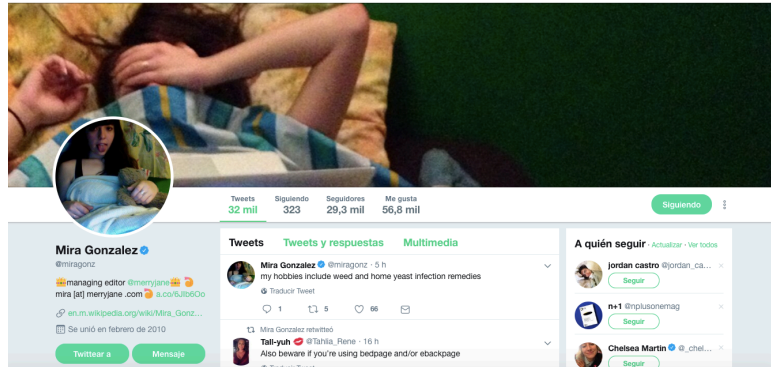
In the case of Gonzalez, she decided to publish a selection of her *Twitter*³⁶ posts in *Selected Tweets* (2015), a collaborative work with also *Alt Lit* writer Tao Lin. Whether Gonzalez’s attempt of recording her thoughts can be compared to the *live*-blogging attempts made by Boyle is not as relevant, what is important to point out is “the performative act of tweeting” as a form of displaying the “insecurities, neurosis, and vulnerabilities” of Millennial youth through their compulsive obsession for “revealing” themselves (Escoria 8th June 2015, *The Fader*) Gonzalez, as Boyle,

³⁴ *Escritura en vivo*’s official webpage: <https://escrituraenvivo.org/>

³⁵ Todos tenemos en la cabeza esa imagen del escritor como un ente solitario que se sienta ante su máquina de escribir en la más completa intimidad de su habitación propia. Cambiamos la máquina Olivetti por un MacBook y únicamente cambia la luz. El aislamiento permanece intacto. La escritura, a diferencia de otras disciplinas artísticas, no suele ser compartida en directo ante el público. [...] Los espectáculos de Escritura en Vivo han llegado a reunir a doscientas cincuenta personas en torno a una gran pantalla. En ella se proyecta el texto que se va construyendo en ese mismo instante. Tú asistes a los errores de dedo, a las incongruencias y, también, a la magia de una historia bien hilada con tan sólo tres elementos clave y tres minutos para improvisar. (My translation)

³⁶ Mira Gonzalez’s link to her personal *Twitter* account: <https://twitter.com/miragonz>

seems to be attracted by the idea of *oversharing* the worst parts of herself, her flaws, through an ironic vision of the self, critically analyzing the gruesome experiences and auto-reflective thoughts from a nihilist and self-defeating tone. As in May 2010, she wrote “I wanna tweet something I’m gonna regret in the morning” (Gonzalez 2015, 1), in January 2013 “Feel unable to tweet anything besides variations of ‘this is a nightmare’ and ‘I’m in hell’” (Gonzalez 2015, 143), or in June 2013 “I tweet from this account when im worried about things that i wont just talk about directly (via extreme passivity and desire to not seem ‘crazy’)” (Gonzalez 2015, 156).



MIRA GONZALEZ'S *TWITTER* ACCOUNT.

As it happens with Broader and Boyle, Gonzalez’s narrative is not understood as a way to record the events of a life, that is what biographies and autobiographies seem to achieve through writing, as Gonzalez herself confesses in February 2010: “I’m already confused as to what I’m supposed to twitter about. My life isn’t interesting” (Gonzalez 2015, 1). According to Gonzalez’s commentary, a writer usually visualizes a life as worth of recording according greater quests and purposes, not writing about dull, ordinary, or even depressing anecdotes of the average person. On the other hand, there is an expressive motive, a confession that should not be unspoken except for being *tweeted*: these authors clearly use online platforms for blogging about their emotional states, to unconsciously portray a *live* ethnography about the emotional turmoils of the Millennial self, with a focus on the breakdowns, existential crisis and boredom of contemporary existence *in* and *out* online.

2.2.2. GiMMe @ll the @ttention: the emptying of language

Some critics have pointed out that we live in the era not only of the Digital, but also of the “I”: the narcissist has overcome the neurotic. The proliferation of the social media has not only transformed *solitude* into *loneliness*, but has also make society more self-centered, hungry for the public attention through online platforms, as it proves the egocentrism around which revolves some popular social networks such as *Instagram*, which has become a public online window displaying highly-idealized (and edited) images of the ‘me’. Lipovetsky defines contemporary narcissism as “a new technology of flexible and self-managed control” that makes one associate with others through a process of “de-socialization” (1992, 55). This also results from social fragmentation and a general

dispersion of multitudes of people in the *megacities* as well as the vastness of the World Wide Web. Applying this to the creative sphere, Lipovestky argues that this dispersion of focus from the collective towards the “I” has also created new forms of “free association”, encouraging “creative spontaneity”, “lack of directivity”, the increase of “temporality” that also destroys and empties, both socially and emotionally, the “I”, by an “excess of informations” (1992, 56-57) The emptying of “narrative” is pointed out by Han as a symptom of the digitalization of “counting” rather than “telling”. The “counting” of *likes*, *shares*, *retweets* are more valued than the quality of the content published: “the word ‘digital’ refers to the finger (*digitas*) that counts above all. The digital culture relies on the fingers that count. [...] The *digital* man constantly counts and calculates in this sense.” (Han 2014a., 41) The digital era is the era of the numbers, the *digits*, that are translated and transformed into “the language of performance and efficiency” (Han 2014, 42) for the sake of contemporary capitalist productivity and austerity.

This scarcity of meaning can be noticed in the way *emojis* and *memes* have simplified textual language in the Internet, and even substituted it sometimes, for the sake of creating “multiples mistakes, lacks and confusion”, as García Cerdán writes on his essay on the “The empty sign”. His questioning invites the reader to re-think how much social media has affected the way information is transmitted and the ways in which communication has been distorted:

Communication has stopped being communication and has become one of a form of solitude. [...] Someone should ask, consequently, what is failing in the communication systems. Does technology tear us apart, in the end, from each other? In which ways are WhatsApp or Messenger, in truth, forms of miscommunication? [...] Is this the age of post-truth? Is only truth what is imposed by power or force as truth? It could give the impression that we have fallen into the clutches of a skepticism that prevents us from believing anything we are told. [...] We could say using the words of Jean Baudrillard that we accepted the simulacrum, the appearance of the real. (García Cerdán 2018, *Ocult Lit*)³⁷

At the end of the first episode of the first season in Lena Dunham’s *Girls* (HBO 2012)³⁸, the main character, Hannah, a recent graduate, jobless and aspiring writer in her 20s living in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, tries to convince her parents to keep supporting her financially, after getting high on opium. She claims that “I think that I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least a

³⁷ La comunicación ha dejado de ser comunicación y se ha convertido en una de las formas de la soledad. [...] Habría que preguntarse, en consecuencia, qué falla en los sistemas de comunicación. ¿Las tecnologías nos alejan, en el fondo, de los demás? ¿De qué forma WhatsApp o Messenger son, en verdad, formas de descomunicación? [...] ¿Es esta la época de la postverdad? ¿Es solo verdad lo que imponen el poder o la fuerza como verdad? Puede dar la sensación de que hemos caído en las garras de un escepticismo que nos impide creer nada de lo que nos dicen. [...] Podríamos decir con Jean Baudrillard que nos conformamos con el simulacro, con la apariencia de lo real. (García Cerdán 2018)

³⁸ *Girls* HBO Season 1 Episode 1 scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6csRnb6ECTI>

voice. Of a generation.” (Dunham 2012, season 1, episode 1) Her initial assertiveness and self-confidence dilute at the same pace as she decides to quit her unpaid internship, after her boss rejects her request for paying her, realizing that she is totally replaceable for other candidates in a endless waiting-list. In the end, even her parents do not back her up anymore, turning this critical point at the beginning of real adulthood: this first introductory-episode shows how she struggles between committing to her dreams and balancing real life as a Millennial. *HBO Girls* perfectly portrays how a group of four young women, Hannah and her friends, try, and most of the times, fail to figure out what they want from life, inhabiting the complicated transition between girlhood and adulthood: an in-betweenness that is characterized by its inconsistency and indeterminacy, full of responsibilities and few rewards. Maybe Hannah was right: maybe she was, and is, a voice of her generation. One of the countless voices who want to make themselves a name in this already-saturated world of trial-and-error.



EPISODE 1, SEASON 1 FROM GIRLS HBO, 2012.

2.2.3. Grrrls (un)p0wered: *Trophy Kids* meet the w0rld

This context proposed by Dunham in *HBO Girls* also resonates in Gabby Bess’ poem “Bad Bitch”³⁹ (2013), in which the poet illustrates the difficulties she must face to be recognized as a writer, to get her work published and to make a living out of it. The title is a direct reference to hip hop culture and rappers’ vision on women, who are often called “bitch” on their lyrics of hip hop music, which is generally criticized for its implicit misogyny. This poem is a reflection on what makes a woman more *womanly* and how this conditions how the world perceives her, especially in

³⁹ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 297](#).

relation to fame. As it also happens in *Girls*, the poem takes us to the city of New York, the city of loneliness and alienation *per excellence*, which seems to have become the epitome of Millennial youth's dreams-to-never-become-true, and one of the most vibrant places for artistic creation in the United States for the last decades:

We mapped out every conceivable route through the
subways of New York
in our search to find Jay Z to show him our poetry,
unsolicited. (Bess 2013, 46)

This paragraph is an allusion to a viral video⁴⁰ of a woman meeting Jay Z at the New York subway without even knowing who he was. To contextualize a little bit more about this incident, Jay Z is a famous Afro-American rapper as well as entrepreneur involved in different type of business, specially related to the show business. Together with his wife and famous fellow artist and singer Beyoncé, they are the most influential couple of the USA in the recent years. For Bess, the experience of getting recognition from a star becomes a “process of our bodies shrunk feeling humbled” (Bess 2013, 189), meaning that she learnt a valuable lesson about what means to be successful and how difficult is to be valued as a real poet and as a professional in adulthood. Bess belongs to this generation of young adults who are joining the workforce for the first time and realizes that the constant struggle and competition are real barriers to success.



WOMAN MEETING JAY AT THE NEW YORK
SUBWAY, 2012.

For some researchers, Millennials suffer from the *Trophy Kids*' complex⁴¹, which can be described as having unrealistic expectations about what is to become adult after being constantly indulged into easy praise and instant gratification for their achievements during childhood and adolescence by parents and teachers. As some experts argue, this generation seems to expect to find the same old structures these that young adults encountered at high schools and colleges but at the workplace, expecting quick rewards and career promotions due to their acquired merits throughout educational formation. But what is mostly true, it is that their effort does not pay off as fast as they want or expect to: so, most of times they face frustration and delusion since the system is not usually ready to value and use their talent and also due to generational clashes and old-fashioned

⁴⁰ ‘Woman to Jay Z: *Are you famous?*’ (CNN, 2012): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lk3yaaN11w

⁴¹ Check **chapter 1: What is *Alt Lit*?** for further information on this topic.

bureaucratic structures, which still prevails in many companies and other workplaces. This dose of humility is explicitly portrayed in the following lines:

Jay Z politely declined our poetry in a form
rejection letter that I printed out and framed
and often look at now as it sits on the edge of my desk in
my corner office with a view.
I look back
on the whole thing fondly and have a laugh
with you as we catch up over drinks. (Bess 2013, 46)

Forced resignation and acceptance of the first clumsy tumbles into early adulthood seem to be condensed in the aforementioned lines. The real struggle of this new generation is to cope with enough patience to achieve their goals and to succeed in life as fully fulfilled adults. Zafra reflects on how society currently weights triumph and failure by analyzing the way these values are publicly displayed online:

Triumph is live. So is failure as well. The “subject who creates” listens to and waits for the opinion of others. This close people’s opinion lives with our position “in the world”. Nowadays failure and triumph are overexposed to the world, even IT-based by the world in the net. [...]
If creative triumph is public recognition, the risk of who triumphs is to expose him/herself to the ridicule of failure, after that of satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is maybe in public failure where we find more freedom, since it is a place as dark as it is discreet. (Zafra 2017, 53-54)⁴²

Bess’ failure of getting acknowledged by an artist she already admires, and the way she copes with this humiliation, by framing Jay Z’s rejection letter and keeping it displayed at her workplace, proves the resignation with which many contemporary aspiring authors have to deal with before, or probably never, they get to see whether they could ever become professional writers:

we started from the bottom
and now we are still at the bottom,

buried in a mattress like drug money. (Bess 2013, 46)

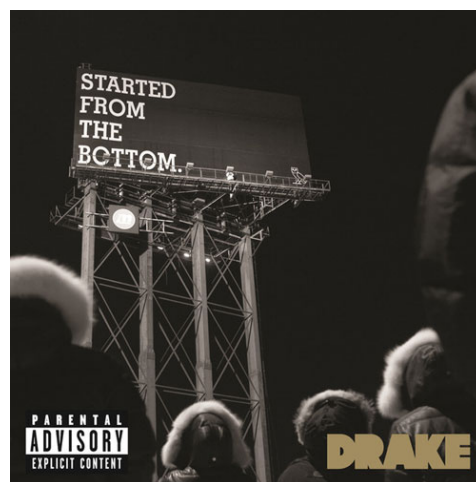
These lines echo Drake’s famous lyrics from *Started from the Bottom*⁴³ (2013), in which the Canadian rapper tells the personal story behind his successful career in the music scene:

⁴² El triunfo es en directo. El fracaso también. El “sujeto que crea” escucha y espera la opinión de los otros. Esa opinión de la gente cercana convive con el posicionamiento “en el mundo.” Hoy fracaso y triunfo están sobreexpuestos al mundo, incluso computados por el mundo en la red. [...]
Si el triunfo creativo es un reconocimiento público, el riesgo de quien triunfa es exponerse al ridículo del fracaso, después de la complacencia. Todo va muy rápido. Las cosas cada vez duran menos. Sin embargo, es quizá en el fracaso público donde más libertad encontramos, pues es un lugar tan oscuro como discreto. (My translation)

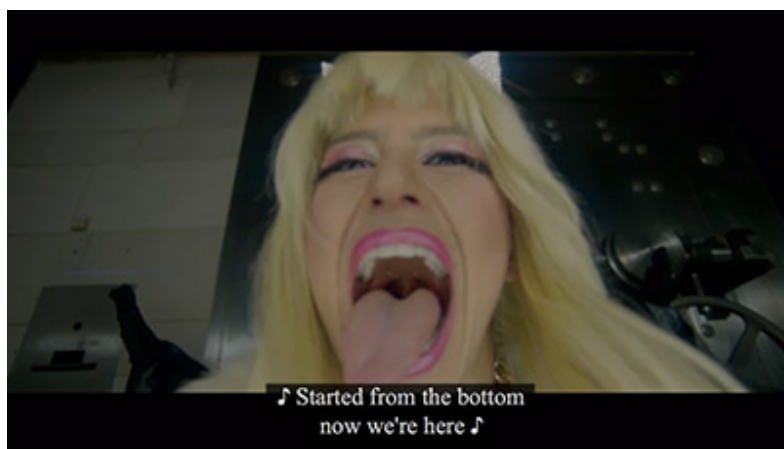
⁴³ *Started from the Bottom* – Drake (2013): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-D6USHQMFDE>

Started from the bottom, now we're here
 Started from the bottom, now my whole team fuckin' here
 [...]
 I done kept it real from the jump
 Livin' at my momma's house, we'd argue every month
 Nigga, I was tryna get it on my own
 Workin' all night, traffic on the way home
 And my uncle callin' me, like, "Where you at?
 I gave you the keys, told you bring it right back"
 Nigga, I just think it's funny how it goes
 Now I'm on the road, half a million for a show, and we –

A parody of the song was made by famous TV comic duo Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson in the first season of *Broad City* (2014), under the title 'Eight Fucking Thousand Dollars'⁴⁴, which is the intro de the last episode of that season ('No one can hear you scream'), in which both protagonists comically depict the economic struggle young Millennial adults face everyday. The two young protagonists enter a bank in order to cash the first check one of them has ever received for selling one of her art works: the scene takes the audience into imagining them as *Dope Girls* of a party whereas the rest of customers and bank workers joins them in order to celebrate this professional achievement in Abbi's precarious career. Bess' use of the phrase "started from the bottom / and now we are still at the bottom" (Bess 2013, 46) produces the effect opposed to the two examples



SINGLE COVER FOR DRAKE'S *STARTED FROM THE BOTTOM*, 2013.



STILL FROM *BROAD CITY*, EPISODE 9, SEASON 1, 2014.

mentioned before. In fact, Bess plays with the concept of "bitch", exploring its possibilities as a term for female empowerment despite its commonly-known negative connotations. For the speaker, calling another woman "bitch" would mean "Girl Power" like "Jay Z calls you a bad bitch in a way means 'Dope Girl'", which means

⁴⁴ 'Eight Fucking Thousand Dollars' – *Broad City* (2014, season 1, episode 9): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tDN5DYsNk0>

flawless, top young woman. In a scale from “what we were to CEOs of the Word Bitch”. Then, as life continues, she keeps on partying, celebrating her humiliation by singing songs like Bruno Mars’ “LADIES IS PIMPS TOO”, inspired on Jay Z’s lyric line from “Dirt Off Your Shoulder”, and a factitious song under the title of “I GIVE UP ON LIFE” (Bess 2013, 46). She complains about her own negative view of life by saying: “Damn, I took it / so much to heart that I / couldn’t even sleep with / those words inside of my chest.” (Bess 2013, 46) Bess’ ironic tone sways between empowerment and defeat, between enjoyment and sadness, confidence and embarrassment. This poem shows up a series of generational issues concerning the economic effects of the recession, unfulfilled aspirations in life, and the struggles of a young person faced during the early 2010s: constantly crashing against one’s own dreams and hopes for the future, and then having to face the reality of surviving in a capitalist society and culture where you have been taught to consume and to be consumed in exchange.

Bess’ poem can be also compared to the following visual image, which is connected to the poem “the big ones eat the little ones”⁴⁵ too from Ana Carrete’s first work *Baby Babe*, published in 2012. In this poem, Carrete complains about how some family members make fun of her artistic career by calling her “the writer” ironically, as if her artistic pretensions were not good enough to be considered serious. In this image, there is a page full of the Spanish interjection for laughing in the online textual language, which is “jajaja” instead of the English one “hahaha”. At the end of this continuum of laughter, there is the phrase “LA POETA”, which means “the poet” in English. This can be interpreted as a reference to the expression “the writer” mentioned in the poem. The fact that this expression is put in between quotation marks remarks the mockery of the phrase itself which is also referring to the author herself. Belittling women’s efforts to make a name for themselves in the literary scene



CARRETE 20, 2012.

has been a constant throughout history, especially for young aspiring women. Joanna Russ published in the early 1983 *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, a sarcastic critic in the form of guidebook, in order to publicly denounce the manners in which women’s works have been prohibited, devaluated, ignored, isolated and denied the agency and public recognition for their creative efforts (Russ 1994, 5), compared to those ones of their fellow men’s writers.

⁴⁵ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 310](#).

As we have seen, *Alt [C]Lit* authors, as well as other fellow female authors belonging to other artistic areas, have been writing from their own personal experiences in order not only to connect with their potential audience, but also as a form of self-affirmation, in order to channel their inner self towards the outside. It seems that the online platforms allow a secure space from which to express these conflicting feelings, and also to create alternative forms of being in the world. The longing for interaction expressed through writing is manifested in these contradictions that Millennials seem to find difficult to deal with when connecting and keeping relationships of any kind with others. Even though not all implications are totally as positive. Public recognition is hard when a whole generation, such as the Millennial one, has been accused of obsessive narcissism, compulsive instant gratification, and depressive and lonely tendencies which also clashes with their longing for human interaction at online sites.

As for women writers, all these accusations are even harsher once a certain kind of success has been achieved. The author, contrary to what Barthes proposes, is not dead. Not now that people are looking for the real in the virtual world of the Internet. Millennials have been infantilized longer than any previous generation, and their helplessness is just a symptom of society that has tried to protect them from life itself. Now, vulnerable towards adulthood, they have no choice than to scape to the ephemeral fantasies offered on the Internet, a world that instead of nagging them, secretly encourages them to deny their own reality. In a real world that they are not allowed to be fully themselves, authors such as Melissa Broder, Mira Gonzalez, Gabby Bess, and Ana Carrete find their way for being and existing through the limitlessness offered by the Internet: their only chance to be able to regain the creative agency that has been denied in the real world outside their computer's screens. A *Girl-eration*, who has not been allowed, and does not want to, grow up yet, awaits in their virtual cocoon of social media, buried under their bed quilts, watching and typing compulsively, thinking: "I think a girl, not yet a woman. I think somewhere in the in-between", (Wickman 6th April 2012, *The Awl*) as once Dunham confessed about the meaning behind the title of her now world-famous TV show.

Chapter 3. LØnely-Narcissist Sovl(s): the InstAnt-gram(\$) of Self[ie]-reparation

God, but life is loneliness, despite all the opiates, despite the shrill tinsel gaiety of "parties" with no purpose, despite the false grinning faces we all wear.

Sylvia Plath (*The Unabridged Journals*, 2000, 31)

Needy, lonely, stitched by pain, - Edna St. Vincent Millay ("Moriturus," *Collected Poems of E.S.V.M.*, 2001)

Millennials have been categorized as a highly narcissist generation, as I have already pointed out in the introduction to this Thesis, more concretely in the section where I describe the *Alt Lit* community as part of it. I'm not employing this term in a way to describe a personality disorder related to what we understand as *narcissism*. I'm not even suggesting with this term that the number of diagnosed narcissists has increased in recent generations. I would rather employ it by referring to a personality trait used by experts to describe a prominent generational feature. A series of terms, such as 'self-absorbed,' 'self-centered,' 'egoistical,' 'selfish,' and so on, have been attributed to a whole generation, conformed by around 83 million of US citizens (*CNN Library* September 4th 2018) in actuality, and which constitutes one the largest populations of the country after the *Baby Boom* generation, as well as one of the most racially and ethnically diverse according to recent data. A bridge- generation that lingers between the present and the immediate future, a present-future that is transformed more rapidly than ever before, especially in terms of technological and digital advances. This fact has affected the configuration of this generation as a unified multitude-identity that belongs to a particular period of contemporary history from a sociological perspective, as I would argue later in this chapter.

However, the debate about whether the Millennial-narcissist stereotype corresponds to a quantitative reality is still opened up to debate by many other sociologists and psychologist even more recently. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is not to clarify or stand up for any particular position in this respect: I would like to focus our attention towards how the poetry of these *Alt [C]Lit* authors are symptomatic of a particular kind of socio-cultural phenomena, that is diffused and complex in its problematics. Hence, what interests my research is to analyze, from a socio-cultural perspective, the implications of such stereotype and how this is displayed by the *Alt [C]Lit* literary production. For this reason, I have decided to analyze a number of factors from a psychoanalytical and sociological perspective. These are: loneliness, creativity, mental illness, the compulsive consumption of prescription drugs and the influence of city life in the configuration of the Millennial imagery and self-perception as a generation.

3.1. The (Ex)cess of Isolation and the (Ex)haustion: From (Un)-interrupted Solitude to Millennial Lonely Angst

Imagine that human existence is defined by an Ache: the Ache of our not being, each of us, the center of the universe; of our desires forever outnumbering our means of satisfying them. - Jonathan Franzen (*How to Be Alone* 2002, 308)

We live hyperconnected through solitude - Samanta Schweblin, (Losa October 23, 2018)⁴⁶

Everybody has a romantic vision about the writer as a creature creating in solitude, like an alien marginalized from society who tries to find her own voice outside the boundaries of normativity: (s)he is seen as a lonely hermit devoted to a constant and compulsive typing task. But before moving any further, a distinction between loneliness and solitude should be addressed since often both concepts are used interchangeably as synonyms when, in fact, both define different states of being. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *solitude* is “the quality or state of being alone or remote from society”, closely associated to terms such as *isolation* and *seclusion*. On the other hand, *loneliness* is identified as the state of “being without company” or to be “cut off from others”. The great difference in connotation between both terms is the fact that *solitude* seems to be related to a conscious choice of separating oneself from the rest whereas *loneliness* is more closely connected to a form of isolation that denotes the inability to connect with others, and thus this drives the individual towards developing a longing for an unrequited companionship.

The line between *solitude* and *loneliness* seems to be a confusing one since individuals constantly fluctuate in order to find a peaceful balanced place of their own inside their psyche, as Sontag describes in *Death Kit*: “[...] to convert loneliness into something noble, when freely elected: solitude.” (Sontag 1986, 47) In other words, *loneliness* seems to represent our most unspeakable and vulnerable state of mind in relation to our social interactions and the physical location of our bodies in the world, whereas *solitude* seems to be a condition to be chosen by the individual herself, rather than imposed on. Apparently, the dichotomies established between both terms pathologizes these radicalized forms of being by providing control, or its lack of, to the ways in which individuals interact with their environment from a sociological perspective: “Solitude is strong” (1986, 47) according to Sontag.

As stated by British cultural historian Fay Bound Alberti, an expert in the history of medicine and science, *loneliness* and *solitude* are different concepts that have different genealogies and unrelated origins, even though people, and even critics, seem to mix them often. In her article ‘Loneliness is a Modern Illness of the Body,’ published in 2018 in *The Guardian*, she defends the thesis that *loneliness* is the result of the process of industrialization that began in the 19th century.

⁴⁶ “Estamos hiperconectados en la soledad” (My translation)

Since people used to live in small close-knit communities before the expansion and creation of bigger cities, urban life has become the epitome of corporeal distance, and thus, has isolated people more from each other, not only psychologically, but also through the lack of direct physical contact between them. As individualism was promoted by the economy and the culture of urbanites, the distinction between *solitude* and *loneliness* became more evident from a historical perspective, as Alberti defends:

Of course, solitude existed, and solitude (when not chosen) could be damaging, just as loneliness is today. But the modern, existential angst of feeling alone couldn't exist, because the modern "individual" didn't emerge until the 19th century, with industrialization in the west and the creation of philosophical and political systems focusing on individualism. (Alberti 1st November 2018, *The Guardian*,)

Solitude as a state of retirement was not a strange gesture in the past: some people, with the economic and social means, decided to take a break from this, sometimes, oppressing atmosphere of unaware and continuous vigilance by others. Before the Industrial Revolution, societies were more intimately connected throughout their daily lives, and every aspect of their personal doings was shared commonly not only with families but also with neighbors. Everyone was actively involved through moral and religious beliefs that structured and negotiated social relations. Traditionally, the act of writing was conceived as a mode of isolation, a lonely task that was performed in the intimacy of a space of one's own. Some writers found different environments from which they could get the inspiration or the focus to write in what they thought to be more peaceful compared to the distracting trivial company of other fellow human beings. But, is *solitude* made for humankind?

3.1.1. From Thoreau's reflective Solitude: the Hermit's writing

Tracing back to philosophical discussions around human nature and its condition as a social animal, many thinkers speculated about *solitude*. Many intellectuals speculated about the intellectual, and even spiritual, benefits of self-imposed isolation from society. From early Christianity, hermits have been praised as an example of moral purity, abstaining from every possible sinful distraction belonging to an ever-going corrupted society. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the way towards God was closer to isolation rather than to mingling with your equals, since perfection and holiness were considered to be only achieved in *solitude* and austerity, as professor Haines-Eitzen claims on the research she made about the role of hermits in religious history. These early hermits, who emerged around the 4th century in Egypt, chose faraway places,

such as deserts, mountains or caves to find their ways towards the spiritual revelation and transformation that they could no longer find in the noise of ever-growing cities (Haines-Eitzen *The Conversation*, February 8th 2018) In the coming centuries, this revolutionary practice was integrated inside the institutional hierarchies of the later Christian Church, particularly in Europe, in order to exemplify purity, later on associated to the practices of chastity and total devotion to faith.

From a philosophical perspective, many thinkers have reflected on the nature of *solitude* and its effects on human's behavior, especially considering it as a form of voluntary retirement through which some of them thought as the manner through which to achieve illumination towards the absolute *Truth*. Already in the 16th century, Hobbes commented on the egoistical side of human nature, and described it as "the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1909, 99), emphasizing the natural side of individuals as difficult to trust and rely on: this radically opposed Aristotle's well-known assumption about the benefits of the social character of humans. Later in the 18th century, Hume expressed his concerns about the positive effects of this secluded form of lifestyle by comparing it to a form of isolation and alienation from one's equals: "I am first affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am placed in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expelled all human commerce, and left utterly abandon'd and disconsolate." (Hume 1896, 264) On the other hand, Rousseau's *Noble Savage* myth contested Hobbes' pessimistic vision on human nature: the *Noble Savage* trope assumes that good and *pure* nature originates from sentimental views on indigenous populations, which originated from a paternalist guilt based on Western ideas about primitivism, comparing it to the assumed corruption in the Old World during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, Rousseau's reflections on *solitude* can be taken more into consideration for the discussion about the historical development of such term, which he considered as a form of engagement practiced as spiritual freedom:

If I had remained free, unknown and isolated, as nature meant me to be, I should have done nothing but good, for my heart does not contain the seeds of any harmful passion. If I had been invisible and powerful like God, I should have been good and beneficent like him. It is strength and freedom which make really good men; weakness and slavery have never produced anything but evil-doers. (Rousseau 1984,101)

As we can see, Rousseau's intimate reflections in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (1782) advocated and encouraged the autonomy of the individual as well as the equality among individuals of society. During the 19th century, many influential writers emerged from the young nation of the United States of American and decided to retire briefly into the woods of the vast proto-North-

American wilderness in order to find the source for creative inspiration by being in contact with what they believed to be primitive Nature. One of them was famous transcendentalist leader Ralph Waldo Emerson, who explicitly wrote about the joys of being alone, despite he recognizes that this state cannot be a suitable one for everybody, as he points out in *Society and Solitude*, written in 1870.

Earlier on, Thoreau's literary experiment *Walden* (1854) exemplified this thought through experiential practice, through which one can see the implications of *solitude* as a source of self-imposed form for encouraging creative and spiritual renewal: he spent two years living in the woods, isolated from civilization and city life, living with the bare minimum and trying to make or find resources by himself. He did it mostly alone, in order to be and feel closer to Nature, simultaneously making a series of observations and reflections about Nature that were kept in his journals. These notes became the major source of inspiration for his spiritual and philosophical digressions made later into the text we know nowadays. He did not only appreciate the healing powers that Nature had on him, but he also praises the sense of de-intoxicating *solitude* he found in the woods, far from society and its social and moral constraints. This take seems directly related to Emerson's claim on how *solitude* and the direct contact between man and Nature are connected: "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars." (Emerson 1836, 10) Putting into practice the words of his fellow friend, Thoreau found this self-imposed isolation liberating, and even productive for his purposes, such as writing and developing a better communication with others:

Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. [...] we live thick and are in each other's way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another. Certainly less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty communications. (Thoreau 1950, 179)

Menard identified the solitary nature of Thoreau's nihilistic tendencies as an attempt "to find the mental space work" (Menard 2018, 27) According to the times, Romantic writers were obsessed with "the exotic or remote" as an alluring representation of the "foreignness" as "an interval beyond civilized world of Europe, or at least European cities, to create something new and meaningful in art of literature." (Menard 2018, 29) Furthermore, he defends the fact that Thoreau's longing for "solitude and silence" in *Walden* expressed a desire for finding a place from which "to speak in his own voice" and to create an "open space, a cleaning, within the sphere of language, enabling him to

transcend the linguistic boundaries of colonial culture.” (Menard 2018, 31-32) Whereas for men *solitude* represented a temporary retirement in which to find and get the inspiration in order to renovate themselves, as Faulkner once claimed about writing as “a solitary job” (Simpson 1975, 126), on the other hand, solitary seclusion becomes for women as a protective alternative which counters the compulsory imposition of unwanted marriage. These are the cases of Jane Austen, the Brönte sisters, Emily Dickinson or Louisa May Alcott, who found the perfect retirement outside the racket of big cities and preferred joining the isolating and quieting wilderness of the countryside. This choice of lifestyle provided these women the opportunity to opt to spinsterhood as a form to secure and provide their creativity freedom a real space within the house without been interrupted by the common troubles of wifehood and motherhood required at their times. Towards the *Fin de Siècle*, the emergence of the figure of the ‘New Woman’ started to define a new generation of educated and independent women who seek professional careers outside the constrains of marriage in a male-dominated society as the Victorian one was. According to researcher Anne Heilmann, this generation of first-wave feminists considered “heterosexual relationships [...] a threat to the New Woman’s self-determination, and such are typically juxtaposed with female friendships.” (Heilmann 2000, 97) Therefore, celibacy was considered a form of retirement from what society considered as normalcy in order to pursue real emancipation, using writing as a means for pursuing such liberation from the burden of being a woman trapped inside a patriarchal system, as Sally Ledger argues:

Novel-writing had always been a viable, acceptable occupation for middle-class women from the eighteenth century onwards, with Jane Austen famously writing her novels in the midst of middle-class domestic space. The women novelists who feature in New Woman fiction are notable not only for their sex but also for being avowedly feminist writers. There is a close association in this fiction between novel-writing and feminist activism: writing itself is seen as a liberatory activity. (Ledger 1997, 27)

Barthes discussed the symbolic implications of cloister as an indistinctively natural space through which individuals instinctively secure themselves for the sake of their privacy in territorial terms (Barthes 2003, 107) By analyzing different spatial cases through historically spiritual buildings and extreme-experiential cases, closely related to the manner, he attempts to prove that the creation of borders which are used to define personal spaces is not only limited to the demarcation of places as protection, but also becomes a form of defining the identity of the occupants inside their very limits (Barthes 2003, 109) The incorporation of social media to this personal enclosed spaces that are the new *room of our own*, quoting Woolf, seems to have changed

the rules of interaction and the very notion of *solitude* by creating a sense of *loneliness* and alienation that are affecting more people nowadays, in particular the younger generations, with no precedents in history: the role of the lonely writer substituting the solitary figure of the hermit writer from the past, as Spanish poet Constantino Molina reflects in the following article, in which he imagines Emily Dickinson addicted to social media, in relation to the virtual as defined in contemporary terms:

Now the hermit can disregard the mass while looking from a social network, (s)he can shut up in her cave while (s)he opens a virtual window-display and (s)he is aware of been observed, in contact and communication, for the public. [...] This now, at the screen of our phones and computers, we see them calm and in peace, retributed with the unanimous applause of those we value for their ecclesiastic courage in the face of the solitude of the woods. (Molina 11th October 2018, *Ocultia Lit*)⁴⁷

As Molina suggests in his article, the contemporary hermit has become an all-available figure that everyone can aspire to become to, without confronting social isolation or rejection. In fact, the non-physical experience of connectivity encourages people to be closer virtually, without being present or necessarily that intimately close to anybody. The disturbing presence of other people is no longer a distraction, but rather an acceptable option. As Melissa Broder once wrote in *So Sad Today*: “You can be with people without having to be with people.” (Broder 2016a, 75) Or said differently, hermits now have the chance of remaining in civilization without risking themselves to go into the absolute isolation of the wilderness thanks to the fickle on-and-off linkable relation with which the Internet connects us all.

3.1.2. From Solitude to Loneliness: America’s Capitalist Utop(Y)a

One can think that the vast wilderness offered by the newly discovered continent of the Americas, in particular that portion that is nowadays known as the United States of America, is the reason why this country has developed a culture based on extreme individualism. A country that has encouraged many individuals to encounter and overcome the unknown, the *Other*, the alterity of undomesticated nature in a solitary mission through which one discovers the *Self* not only as an individual task. The historical formations of the US have been also used to provide the rest of the community with the clarity and necessary awareness about the configuration of a new Nation based on multiple identity-formations. This particularity has determined the development of the country

⁴⁷ Ahora el eremita puede despreciar a la masa mientras la busca desde una red social, puede encerrarse en su cueva mientras abre su escaparate virtual y se sabe observado, en contacto y comunicación, por un público. [...] Ahora sí, en las pantallas de nuestros móviles y ordenadores, los vemos serenos y en paz, retribuidos con el aplauso unánime de los que valoramos su valentía eclesiástica frente a la soledad de los bosques. (My translation)

during the last tumultuous two centuries, which has struggled to overcome decolonizing attempts of ghostly controlling forces coming from the Old World.

As Alexis de Tocqueville noticed at the beginning of the 19th century, the improvement of social conditions as a result of the assimilation of the new nation of the USA into a democratic regime, liberated from the tyrannies of the European absolutist monarchies, drove people towards an equality rarely seen anywhere else in the Western world. As Tocqueville described the young nation of the USA in his famous work *Democracy in America* (1835), the configuration of the US identity was based on the idea that “they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone [...] it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.” (Tocqueville, 2009, 966) In his analysis of Tocqueville’s work, Robert A. Ferguson claims in *Alone in America* that the spatial relations that the first colonizers established with the new found land conditioned this form of individualism based on “[...] leveling tendencies, distrust of authority, suspicion of others, narrow social engagement, and a presentism that loses interest in relationships across time.” (Ferguson 2013, 4) These features will be later interpreted as a form of paranoia, characteristic of the US social identity formations.

During the 1970s, this vision was also supported by Philip Slater in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*. But instead of praising the liberating effects of individualism as emancipating, he points out towards how the negation of human interdependence has also affected the interpersonal relations among US recent generations and has driven them to feel “disconnected, bored, lonely, unprotected, unnecessary, and unsafe” (Slater 1990, 30) He also argues that this longing for materializing privacy has led US society to develop ‘open’ urban spaces which distance them from each other as individuals rather than members of a community, which are “the suburb, the highway” (Slater 1990, 119), to name a few. This seems to be the origins of *loneliness* as a pathological cultural trait in contemporary society: the extreme materialization of *solitude* as a form of pursuing individualism, and thus, independence from others:

The three needs – community, engagement, dependence – are suppressed in our society out of a commitment to individualism. The belief that everyone should pursue her own destiny autonomously has forced us to maintain an emotional detachment from our social and physical environment and aroused a vague guilt about our competitiveness and indifference to others. (Slater 1990, 29)

But now, moving forward towards contemporary times, how did chosen *solitude* become chronic *loneliness* for many Millennial writers and poets nowadays? A possible answer for this can

be found in Gilles Lipovetsky's analysis on contemporary individualism in his book *The Age of Emptiness*, originally published in 1983. He claims that the *solitude*, the isolating act performed by poets in the past, has turned into a feeling of *loneliness*, that results from the apathy and the abandonment of intersubjectivity, a conflicting emotion that "longs and hurts for being alone," (Lipovetsky 1992, 47-48) leading towards an isolation that is unbearable for the self since one cannot stand to be "face to face" with oneself. As Alberti points out in the article which was previously mentioned, *loneliness* manifests itself through our corporeality, materializing itself not only through psychological disorders such as depression or anxiety of any kind, but also has been constituted as a material evidence of a series of factors, such as "the rise of single households, less face-to-face interaction, the influence of social media" (Alberti 1st November 2018, *The Guardian*) She argues that "loneliness is physical", and that the more evident manifestation of this is a pathological lack of touching others: this means the physical connection that brings us all together, to "bring a sense of physical belonging", that is culturally associated to different social bonding activities such as "food, dancing, music, massage, woodworking – all bring elements of touch, movement and the senses" (Alberti 1st November 2018, *The Guardian*) This seems to suggest that *loneliness* is more connected to the stimulation of the body through our social contacts that also brings us a sense of belonging to a community. These factors also condition and affect us physically and psychologically. By living more separately from each other, that is by putting a real physical distance that is evident in the urban configuration of modern cities and contemporary households, results into a series of pathologies that clearly connect the body to the mind, and by separating both crucial parts of our health, it only aggravates this way of feeling alone, disconnected from the real and the others.

In Alan Kirby's *Digimodernism*, the recognition of autism as a developmental disorder has also been extended to establish a behavioral social pattern that can be used to analyze new identity traits to be found in contemporary society: as a chronic symptom of the implications of the virtual and social isolation found more commonly in newer generations. This is characterized, according to Kirby's analysis, by "the demographic shift toward global overpopulation, ever-growing urbanization, the spread of constant formal and informal surveillance, the disappearance of wilderness and the near-impossibility of solitude" (Kirby 2009, 246), as well as "constructing a future Los Angeles of infinite loneliness and alienation, emptied of reciprocity or intimacy, a mixture of vast silent spaces between affectless people and unbearable overcrowding," (Kirby 2009, 244) that results into what he calls a social symptom of "almost universal autism." (Kirby 2009, 244) Byung-Chul Han also shares this vision in *In the Swarm* by explaining how the communal is

disappearing by favoring antisocial attitudes, which are highly encouraged by the intervention of technological devices that dilutes the ‘multitude’ that constitutes the community into a chorus of interconnected ‘lonely souls’ inside the dazed infinitude of the world wide web:

What characterized the current social formation is not the *multitude*, but rather *loneliness* (*non multitudo, sed solitudo*). This formation is immersed in a general decadence of the common and communal. Solidarity disappears. The privatization is imposed in the soul. The erosion of the communal makes it less likely to common action.⁴⁸ (Han 2014a., 20)

Thus, the recurrent evocation of a certain image has become so common to us, that is almost impossible to be unable to visualize it: a room in total or semi-darkness, a person compulsively typing, or just staring, at the fluorescent screen of her portable computers, either facing a desk, or sitting or lying on her bed. Who has not been that person at some point in our lives? The personal computer has become a new space in which the possibilities of being radically opposes the unmalleable materiality of our real selves and bodies. The parallelism between reality and the digital becomes blurry, and most of times, the digital becomes a *window with doors* (Han 2014a., 23), as Han would denominate it, that leads to the possibilities of entering a different world, an alternative place open to freely connect to the rest of people who we will never probably meet in person, but who are still there watching, seeing and reading us. While many critics from previous generations look with suspicion and mistrust these new forms of digital *connectivity*, the younger generations, or the *Digital Natives*, have a different view on how the new forms of communication and relationships are configured at the Internet, which clearly contrasts with the reality established outside the comfort and intimacy provided by our personal computers or smartphones nowadays. Luna Miguel, Spanish writer and poet, describes this in relation to the existence of new literary groups such as the *Alt Lit*:

Let’s imagine this scene years later, when this teenager is about to turn twenty-something. [...] It is here when our character breaks down crying and writes a poem about this vertigo feeling that continuously stabs h[er]. When I think about this person, I remember Alt Lit. When I think about h[er] inexpressive face, I remember Alt Lit. When I think about a country devastated by a lack of communication and unmeasured anxiolytics, I think about Alt Lit.⁴⁹ (Miguel 2015)

⁴⁸ My translation.

⁴⁹ Imaginemos que años después de esta escena, el adolescente está a punto de cumplir los veintitantos. [...] Es aquí cuando nuestro personaje rompe a llorar y escribe un poema sobre esa sensación de vértigo que continuamente le apuñala. Cuando pienso en esta persona, me acuerdo de la Alt Lit. Cuando pienso en su rostro inexpressivo, me acuerdo de la Alt Lit. Cuando pienso en un país destrozado por la incomunicación y los ansiolíticos desmedidos, pienso en la Alt Lit. (Miguel 2015)

Miguel's description of the transition from teenage years into adulthood shows the angst and frustrations of a whole generation who hoped a better future for themselves, as they parents expected from them. But they are unable to achieve, trapped by economic, political and social constraints that burdens their prospects. This is the roots for these lonely, self-centered, drugged *Alt [C]lit* poets, as I will analyze them in the next section.

3.1.3. W[e]aving the Whale(s): Millennial p0etics of @ngst

The recent Lee Chang-Dong's movie, *Burning* (2018)⁵⁰, based on a short-story written by the popular Japanese author Haruki Murakami, becomes a perfect portrait of the Millennial angst and nihilism that most youngsters display not only in fiction, but also in real life. The protagonist is a recently graduate and young aspiring writer, Jong-Soo, from a rural area near the North Korean



STILL FROM *BURNING* (2018) AT 2:15:21.

border, who admires Faulkner's and Fitzgerald's narrative, and leads a mediocre and precarious life, full of rage and frustration. Throughout the movie, Jong-Soo's stoicism is constantly put into trial: first by mysterious Hae-Mi, a past high-school classmate whom he does not remember well and becomes his unrequited one-night-stand love; and later on, by charismatic Brian, a rich young man who Hae-Mi met in Africa and becomes her love interest, and so he becomes Jong-Soo's antagonistic nemesis. The narrative slowly changes from a quiet apathy and routine towards an exploding and thrilling ending that leaves the circumstances that lead Jong-too towards it as open to the interpretation of the spectator as many other parts of the story remain unresolved as well. There is a scene that embodies the Millennial angst that is universal nowadays: Jong-Soo is shown

⁵⁰ *Burning's* trailer with English subtitles: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wi6Kw7V8gXk>

creepily typing on his computer in Hae-Mi's room while she is absent. After they had a brief sexual encounter before she leaves for her trip of self-discovery to Africa, Hae-Mi's chaotic apartment becomes a place where he usually goes to masturbate at various points throughout the movie in order to disconnect from his dissatisfying reality: looking absent-minded, lost in his imagination, looking throughout the window towards the distant infinite loneliness of the big city of Seoul. In this sense, the movie characterizes the Millennial angst not only in the South Korean context, but it also applies to how Jong-Soo's existential resignation and passive frustration paralyzes him into inaction and leads him towards making bad decisions. Therefore, he becomes the epitome of Millennial global decadent existence, as some reviewers have pointed out:

So much of the story is not believing something is there but rather forgetting something is *not* there. It turns a challenging film into a generational allegory: Coping with millennial malaise involves that same kind of forgetting—forgetting that you are empty, forgetting the anger that accompanies a generation that is so stagnant. (Clark 1st November 2018, *Vice*)

As a literary parallelism, Jong-Soo's character contrasts with Melville's Bartleby despite their common anti-heroic traits: Jong-Soo shelters himself in the openness of the individualistic urban landscape, whereas he longs for intimacy and acceptance in Hae-Mi's room. By exploring the boundaries between fiction and reality in the first-person narration of a *nobody*, a *looser*, the spectator can only have access to Jong-Soo's point of view of the story throughout the whole movie, and we only get to know Hae-Mi and Brian through his eyes and his imagination. On the other hand, we can only get to know Bartleby from the testimonies of those who "knew" him collected by the third-person anonymous narrator in Melville's work. What links these two narratives is the depiction of isolation and the unreliability presented by both narrators, which leaves no closure, and many unanswered questions, at the end of each story.

Sarah Jean Alexander's poem "In Place of Me"⁵¹ (2015, 16) seems to be a reflection about loneliness, depression and being single that resembles that of Bartleby's and Jong-Soo's struggles. Just by paying some attention to the title, one can notice an evident manifestation of the dissociation between the voice and her-self, placing her consciousness at different levels concerning place and the state of being "me". Moreover, the distance between physically locating oneself and being present mentally is not clearly defined in the poem. In the first part, she focuses on this personality split by comparing her present self with a past one: her inability to recognize herself consciously is only manifested by the synesthetic metaphor of "the way your / cucumber breath tastes against my

⁵¹ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 294](#).

own mouth” (Alexander 2015, 16) By comparing the other person’s breath with a “cucumber” one may suggest that this image evokes a certain sense of freshness, but this is rapidly corrected by the poetic voice when she compares this taste with: “a glass of water that has been sitting on a / nightstand for eight nights with no movement” (Alexander 2015, 16) The lack of motion that this second image provides to the reader’s mind contrasts with the fluid movements associated to water, and even to the progression of time, since the “eight nights with no movement” (Alexander 2015, 16) gives the impression of blockage, inactivity: as if time was suspended in a specific moment in the past, minimally moving.

The deliberate opposition of the “you” and the “I” reinforces the dissociation between the mind and the body, and also provides the “you” with a distance that is not only physical, but which seems to be temporal, emphasized in the first two lines: “I knew you as a living being in one lonely town / and now I only recognize you by the way your / cucumber breath tastes [...]” (Alexander 2015, 16) The present and the past collides through the memories evoked by the senses, in this first instance, by the sense of tasting. Later on, by the visualization of “slightly tinny and dusty and dry, dead skin cells –” (Alexander 2015, 16): most likely, this is a mental projection of the “glass” aforementioned, which is an objectification of the poetic voice’s past self. The “dead skin cells” reference is an important one since, biologically, the cells of our bodies are renovated cyclically every seven years (approximately): so it is not strange to claim that our body changes and is constantly being transformed into a new one with the passing of time. There is an analogy between this biological transformation and the otherness that is produced by our past selves: by being transformed, one does not leave one’s past self behind, but still lingers around us like a ghostly memory of what one was, at the very juncture of the physical present. The “living being” is not other but her-self, a different person she used to know but she no longer identifies with now.

In the next lines, Alexander confesses she would like to have another life, reinforcing this idea of continual transformation in which the individual seems to be constantly challenging one-self in order to produce a new one and make it different from the past one: “it seems easy to create an imaginary twin for all / the events you’d like to attend” (Alexander 2015, 16). But this prospect is only an “imaginary” projection of what she would like to do, not really what she would do as it stated in: “but would rather stay / at home by yourself than touch shoulders with the / people who don’t know what it’s like to be alone.” (Alexander 2015, 16) In these last lines, the voice verbalizes a wish for having an alternative life, recreating herself in the possibilities of having an alter ego: a “twin” who is herself but who is totally not, to do all things she would like to do, especially those ones related to socializing. These lines emphasize the position of *loneliness* as a way of being, a

choice that results from exhaustion and existential weariness. The line “people who don’t know what it’s like to be alone” echoes with the alternative vision about loneliness and social life proposed by the late Marina Keegan in her posthumously published book *The Opposite of Loneliness* in 2014.

Keegan’s work includes the essay she wrote for the special edition of the *Yale News* in 2012, the year she graduated from Yale University and died days later from her graduation ceremony in a car accident. Keegan’s sense of belonging to a community contrasts to Alexander’s loneliness, laziness and isolation; the *Alt [C/Lit]* poet recreates herself in the memories of a past that still gets her stuck, literally, into the present. On the other hand, Keegan’s inspirational text offers a counterpoint to the spirit of the rest of the *Alt Lit* community as well. An expression she used in her essay, “the opposite of loneliness”, inspired the title of her collected works. In that paragraph, she reflected on the notion of *loneliness* and the sense of being part of a community:

We don’t have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that’s what I want in life. What I’m grateful and thankful to have found at Yale, and what I’m scared of losing when we wake up tomorrow after Commencement and leave this place.

It’s not quite love and it’s not quite community; it’s just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. [...] That time we did, we went, we saw, we laughed, we felt. The hats. (Keegan 2014, 1)

In Keegan’s case, some may accuse her of her privileged position as a Yale graduate, which already provides different prospective hopes about her future as well as a positive view that comes from easily praise and recognition she could constantly receive due to her social position of privilege. This is an important fact in order to compare Keegan’s statement with that of Alexander’s: in a position of constant praise and non-economic struggle, it is not strange someone would enjoy social life. Therefore, both writers represent opposing spectrums of both the social and the literary: an issue that revolves around the question of racial and class privilege that still prevails disguised in contemporary US society. The fact that Alexander prefers to “stay / at home by yourself than touch shoulders with the people ...” (Alexander 2015, 16) perfectly illustrates a mode of *social anxiety* because it depicts the conscious dislike that the thought of “touching shoulders” with strangers at an overcrowded party produces on her: anxiety is triggered by the physical contact with *Other(s)*. This image contrasts with the comfort of her home, the privacy of her bedroom, the reassurance of her computer screen. Therefore, the title “In Place of Me” by Alexander speaks about the disconnection between mind and body, present and past, reality and possibility that clearly illustrates a generation of Millennials and their paradoxical existence of social resignation.

The connection between *loneliness* and technology is made evident by how many other *Alt [C]Lit* writers, who have also incorporated multiple and explicit references like the ones employed by Alexander in the poem described above, that one in which we are ‘*alone with our computers*’⁵². In “Untitled 5”⁵³ by Mira Gonzalez can be found at her first published collection of poetry *I can never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together* (2013). The poem is clearly an ode about *loneliness* and social anxiety in more evident ways than that of Alexander’s: Gonzalez presents a series of situations and contrasts them at different levels, which is a common motif that can be found in other of her poems. At first, we have an “I”, who is “drinking vodka with ice and feeling incredibly fucked” (Gonzalez 2013, 28), while facing other “people”, who are dancing and hooking up. The *loneliness* and detachment presented through this “I”, who is watching from a safe-physical distance like a drunk spectator or *voyeur*, is contrasted to a group of young people who are actively partying and socializing. The social passivity of the “I” is made evident by how this “I” is portrayed as an outsider disconnected from the social reality that surrounds her, who denies herself engaging into physical and emotional modes of socialization, which are expected under those circumstances. In the next lines, the tone turns into a self-reflective mode about the state of *loneliness* or feeling alone in such paradoxical and particular context, as a kind of self-consolation or inquisitive inquiry about why people nowadays would feel “more lonely”: “I wonder if anyone feels more lonely now than they felt an hour ago.” (Gonzalez 2013, 28) This sentence displays an intentional grammatical mistake that serves to emphasize the speaker’s sense of social detachment and inability to connect with *Other(s)* whenever she is in company.



MIRA GONZALEZ WATCHING THE OSCAR’S FROM HER LAPTOP.

Then this line is followed by one that reminds of Alexander’s in “In Place of Me”: “when they were alone in their rooms looking at things on the internet” (Gonzalez 2013, 28) The Internet must be thought as more than a non-material space that is in an on-going process of creation and expansion, as more and more people get connected to it: as more than the purely virtual, as more than a form of mass media communication. Gonzalez, as well as Alexander and Luna Miguel, sets

⁵² Mira Gonzalez lying on bed with her computer while live-blogging about the Oscar’s in 2013: <https://thoughtcatalog.com/mira-gonzalez/2013/02/mira-gonzalez-liveblogs-the-oscars/>

⁵³ The complete poem can be found in *Appendix 2*, page 319.

out the Internet as something more than a platform: it becomes the epitome of contemporary *loneliness*, social awkwardness and the longing for being still connected to *Other(s)*, even if this connection is temporary, superficial, and anonymous: even as a constructed lie about identity formations. But there is also something more implicit in this particular line: the need for an intimacy that cannot be shared in the presence, that physical and real materiality, of *Other(s)*. Han describes this phenomenon in the following terms:

The digital inhabitants of the net do not congregate. They lack the *intimacy of the congregation*, which would produce a *we*. They constitute a *concentration without congregation*, a *multitude without interiority*, a *group without interiority*, without soul or spirit. They are above all isolated, singularized *Hikikomoris*, who feel solitary in front of the *display* (computer screen). Electronic media such as the radio congregates people, whereas the digital media *isolate* them. (Han 2014a., 17)⁵⁴

This fragment reveals some issues that young people face because of the new ways of socialization and the influence of technology, especially where communication media are widely spread among the population, as it happens in developed countries such as the USA. For both Alexander and Gonzalez, the physical presence and engagement with people in common and traditional social situations, such as parties, clashes with the way we tend to socialize more and more often, which is by having a screen in front of us. It seems that the interaction in person make people like Gonzalez feel uncomfortable or even more alienated than by using social media, such as *Facebook* among others. Another of Gonzalez's poem from the same collection, "I feel more lonely when I am with people than I do when I am alone looking at the Internet"⁵⁵ (Gonzalez 2013, 45), also points towards this line of interpretation: the poet employs the expression "more lonely" again in order to strengthen this overwhelming sense of disconnection from *Other(s)*. According to Melanie Klein, the feeling of loneliness is closely related to a "problem of integration," in the sense that the subject believes that "there is no person or group to which one belongs." (Klein 1975, 302) The title of the poem is a perfect example about how social interactions and relationships are changing due to the influence of social media. In Klenian terms, this behavior can be associated to the way that *paranoid anxiety* raises from the fact that there is a conflictive disturbance in "relation to the internal good object" and a sense of "impaired" mistrust in the corresponding "good part of

⁵⁴ Los habitantes digitales de la red no se congregan. Les falta la *intimidad de la congregación*, que produciría un *nosotros*. Constituyen una *concentración sin congregación*, una *multitud sin interioridad*, un *conjunto sin interioridad*, sin alma o espíritu. Son ante todo *Hikikomoris* aislados, singularizados, que se sientan solitarios ante el *display* (monitor). Medios electrónicos como la radio congregan a hombres, mientras que los medios digitales los *aíslan*. (My translation)

⁵⁵ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 319](#).

the self”: these threats to both the *internal good object* and the *good part of the self* result into “an increased projection of paranoid feelings and suspicious on others, with a resulting sense of loneliness”, as Klein claims (1975, 303), which serves to ultimately isolate the individual in a desperate attempt to protect and preserve these internal parts.

In the introductory lines, the poetic voice presents the typical social situation in which people pretend to be something that they are really not: “in social situations I hide specific parts of my personality that I think / other people might perceive as unappealing.” (Gonzalez 2013, 45) Hence, the game of pretending in order to fit social conventions and avoid rejection can be seen as an adaptive and self-repressive behavior, especially since appearances are more than ever very important for social success, or success in general: the value of social acceptance through mediated social media platforms. One can claim that we live in the times of the *simulacrum*: we inhabit a simulation of reality that is full of appearances, or as Baudrillard puts it, “it is a hyperreal: the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.” (Baudrillard 2001, 2) One becomes a product, a *live* virtual window-shopping that serves to self-imposed the projected and frustrated fantasies of the multitudes: one lives up to *Other(s)*’ expectations of what is perfection, happiness and normalcy. Then, the next lines become a rant reflecting on Gonzalez’s own social attitudes, trying to provide them a reasoning or justification from her own perspective:

I don’t feel like I am pretending to be something different than what I am
I don’t feel like I am anything really
I am very tired all the time
I don’t identify with most people
I don’t think highly of myself (Gonzalez 2013, 45)

For the speaker, hiding certain unappealing parts of her personality is not the same like pretending, since she does not even consider herself ‘anything’ in particular. But interestingly, she attributes herself a series of negative personality traits such as laziness in “I am very tired all the time”, indifferent, like in “I don’t identify with most people”, and insecure, as in “I don’t think highly of myself” (Gonzalez 2013, 45) In order to justify this, she jokes about her pessimistic self-perception: “I am too passive to create a situation in which I convince another / person that I am valuable” (Gonzalez 2013, 45) For Gonzalez, “valuable” means: “[...] someone who deserves things / that my physical presence in the world should induce positive or / negative feelings” (Gonzalez 2013, 45) That is that her indifference towards what surrounds her contrasts with her way of behaving in front of *Other(s)*. The last lines complete this sense of longed

loneliness and isolation as something positive for her: “everyone is growing apart from me / I am letting them do that” (Gonzalez 2013, 45). In a more than ever individualistic society in which most of interactions are performed digitally, the way people relate to each other shows up the need for physical distance whereas at the same time there is unconscious and uncontrollable need of keeping in touch by the constant, and even compulsive, use of social media: which is kind of paradoxical and contradictory at the same time. This is what the title of the poem pretends to embody: people know better how to socialize and to show themselves with a screen in between them than face to face.

The anti-social behavior displayed in both poems by Gonzalez presents the way people struggle about connecting with reality and, especially, with *Other(s)*: the collision between the physical-outside world and the online world offered by our digital devices makes us question about the possibilities of social media to make people more confident and even secure connecting and disconnecting to and from *Other(s)*. It seems as if the existence of a digital barrier between people was reassuring nowadays, which provides a level of intimacy never known before, as well as it creates a new feeling of isolation that is both paradoxically comforting and disturbing. This reflection about contemporary *loneliness* and socialization is very much connected to the way cyberculture affects human interactions and our lives in those terms, which has been discussed in greater detail in the present Thesis.

But not every *Alt [C]Lit* poem depicts *loneliness* in the company of others, or at least, that is what one finds in “20 MG/DAY⁵⁶, by Gabby Bess, published in her first poetry collection *Alone with Other People* (2013). The title, “20 MG/day”, refers to a dose of a medication, which is not specified: I will discuss in greater detail the implications of this medical reference in the following section. The poetic voice starts with a moody tone, “I can still think of anything and still be alone”, that suggests the possibility that this medication is anti-depressants, as it is later confirmed in the line “I feel like my anti-depressants are working” (Bess 2013, 243) At the beginning, Bess creates the context through which the readers come to understand how mental illness and creativity works together for some authors, like for the *Alt [C]Lit* ones, by stating: “I’m alone here, with the whales” (Bess 2013, 243) Whales have been traditionally a symbol which embodies the immensity of the world, the fullness of the body and the death grave. Also, since they are creatures of the ocean, they have been associated with solitude, since they are only seen in groups during the mating season. In Bess’ poem, the “whales” represent an abstraction for people who live in society but in

⁵⁶ The poem complete can be found in [Appendix 2, page 297](#).

loneliness, separated from each other, occasionally communicating and interacting physically, particularly for sexual encounters (like the mating whales), but they are all by themselves, all alone, at the end of the day.

Therefore, the “whales” are the personification of a group of contemporary *Hikikomoris* that Han uses to refer to the *digital natives*, the *homo digitalis*, the *Millennial* generation. As Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the world is an immense and hostile wild sea populated by lonely whales, who barely relate to each other except for biological survival: the social isolation that conforms the hyper-urban culture is only connected through devices, which also isolate us even more into our intimate spaces, that of our bedrooms. The speaker digs deeper into what this *loneliness* means to the creative process in the following lines:

I wrote this poem and now I am alone with
this poem, the whales, and the abstractly formed
thoughts that I’ve already forgotten about. (Bess 2013, 59)

These lines describe the immense emptiness created by this sense of *loneliness* a person who is depressed feels: when one’s own mind is not enough company to console oneself from this lack of emotional stability, that associated to the presence of *Other(s)* and the materiality, the sensuous physicality of a bodily touch. *Loneliness* can be perfectly pictured as how social relations work nowadays: we are surrounded by tons of devices that allow us to be connected with everyone, everywhere, but there prevails still a sense of isolation that prevents one from really connecting with *Other(s)* at an emotional level. For Klein, another possible origin of this sense of loneliness can be traced back to a “depressive feeling of an irretrievable loss” in relation to the “close contact between the unconscious of the mother and the child” as the paradigm of “satisfactory early relation” (Klein 1975, 301). This relation is connected to the “preverbal stage”, in which this “experience of being understood” (Klein 1975, 301) comes from a pre-linguistic relation-formation that is considered to be “the most complete” one. *Loneliness* rises from the fact of “an unsatisfied longing for an understanding without words” (Klein 1975, 301), which resembles this early union with the mother without the intervention of language and the perturbation brought by its symbolic order. The lack of physical contact makes people to turn to themselves as a source of connection to reality, but this still cannot cope and compare with the company of someone different from oneself. This is linked to an increasing sense of individuality created by the physical distance between one and the rest of society, and provided by the illusory sense of connection through social media devices and other technologies. People tend to live more on their own and separated from the rest of the world, like the solitary ‘whales’ in the immensity of an ocean even bigger than themselves. In

The Expulsion of the Other (2017), by Byung-Chul Han, this alienation results from a saturated fragmentation in the way communication is produced nowadays:

Nowadays we devote ourselves into an unrestricted communication. The digital hypercommunication leaves us almost dazed. But the noise of communication does not make us less lonely. Maybe even it makes us lonelier than linguistic barriers. After all, at the other side of the linguistic barrier there is a *you*. This *you* still preserve the *proximity of distance*. The hypercommunication, on the other hand, destroys either the *you* as well as *closeness*. The *relationships* are replaced by *connections*. The lack of distance expels closeness. [...] Silence is the language, whereas the noise of communication is not. (Han 2017a, 36)⁵⁷

The closing line of this poem is particularly interesting in this respect, compared to Han's previous statement: "These words that I write don't compare to what I've imagined / I am powerful force amongst whales" (Bess 2013, 244) Here, Bess evokes Virginia Woolf's quote from *The Waves*, written in 1931: "But for pain, words are lacking" (Woolf 1960, 187) Both writers, Bess and Woolf, attempt to express the inability of language as a medium of expression for certain moods, emotions or experiences, including that of portraying the human mind and soul. Just by the use of metaphors writers sometimes, including poets, might attempt to capture what the human mind has inside. In the case of Bess, if we pay attention to Han's theory about the relationship between *hypercommunication* and *isolation*, we can add that words, despite the availability of language and its relevance in communication nowadays, cannot compare to the powerful evocation of an image that has been created by the mind: language cannot connect people anymore, only separate them from each other, and emphasize this inability to bring everybody together: this is very juncture, the core, of the problematics brought by *hypercommunication*, which equates *miss(ed)-communication*. That's why the speaker claims that "I am a powerful force amongst the whales" (Bess 2013, 244), which is interpreted as the power of self-reliance and resilience that can be found in *loneliness*: she only has herself, nobody else. The next line closes the poem, leaving the reader with a lack of closure:

Painted onto the wall tiles, the whales are on clouds and
their bodies are clouds too.
Sometimes I press my head against the shower wall and
cry quietly into them. (Bess 2013, 59)

⁵⁷ Hoy nos entregamos a una comunicación irrestricta. La hipercomunicación digital nos deja casi aturdidos. Pero el ruido de la comunicación no nos hace menos solitarios. Quizá incluso nos haga más solitarios que las *rejas lingüísticas*. Al fin y al cabo, al otro lado de la reja lingüística hay un *tú*. Ese *tú* preserva aún la *proximidad de la lejanía*. La hipercomunicación, por el contrario, destruye tanto el *tú* como la *cercanía*. Las *relaciones* son reemplazadas por las *conexiones*. La falta de distancia expulsa la cercanía. [...] El silencio es el lenguaje, mientras que el ruido de la comunicación no lo es. (My translation)

Considering the previous claim in the line “my anti-depressants are working” (Bess 2013, 59), the line in this section “sometimes I press my head against the shower wall and / cry quietly into them (whales-clouds)” (Bess 2013, 59) contradicts the previous statement. First of all, who are these “them”? The “whales”-clouds? The “words” of her “poem”? Could the poem’s words be also the “whale”-clouds? Are “them” the attempt of convincing oneself that you are ok when you are not as a sign of self- denial, and rejecting one’s own real feelings, rather than those ideally projected through the placebo effect of the “anti-depressants”? At this second part of the poem, the “whales” are more than symbols: “painted onto the wall tiles, the whales are on clouds and / their bodies are clouds too” (Bess 2013, 59). In this line, it seems that the “whales on clouds”, and/or the “whales-clouds” too, are pareidolias created and projected by the poetic voice’s mind, which transform the boundaries between reality and the inner world into a blurry and indistinguishable line: what is real? what is it made up by her mind? is there an attempt for the self-imposition of positivity through medication that proves to be ineffective, but the speaker still denies it consciously? In this sense, sadness is depicted as a ghost that haunts her like the shadow of depression, that is associated to the image of the “whales” which are “clouds”. This image intensifies the distress and *loneliness* felt by the speaker in a world disconnected from the physical and detached from the real world outside of the self.

To a certain extent, this poem can also be compared to one by Sara Jean Alexander, “minute lengthening of the day”⁵⁸, which can also be found in *Wildlives* (2015), because of the use of ocean-related images to depict depressive feelings. The title refers to how boredom leads us to be over-conscious of the passing of time in our lives, and this potentially leads towards existential boredom and, thus, depressive states: the measurement of a day by “minutes” is a hyperbolic use that emphasizes the slowness of a day by paying attention to this precise mode of timing, instead of employing a bigger measure such as the hour. Instead of the saying “count the hours”, which expresses an eagerly waiting, the “minutes” counting seems to slow down time from a contemplative passivity: who has the time to pay attention to the minutes of the day if you are doing something else? Therefore, the title suggests how procrastination is linked a depressive mode, which slows time, progressively, unnoticed.

In the first stanza, we are introduced to the subconsciousness of the speaker, embodied in the metaphor of “ocean weaves late at night” (Alexander 2015, 72), which are depicted as a furtive thief who tries “to secretly steal from another.” (Alexander 2015, 72) Water is a symbol related to

⁵⁸ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 204](#).

fluidity, transformation and also to femininity, as it is evident in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899). For Edna Pontellier, the main character of Chopin's novel, the "sea" represented a sensuous power of nature that made her become aware of the limits of her body and her need to embrace herself sexually so she could be totally free as an individual: her encounters with the sea, which were stimulated by her sudden interest in the activity of swimming, motivates this suggestive connection between the female body and the fluidity of the sea, as it shows the following passage:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (Chopin 2003, 57)

But Alexander's image of the "waves late at night", reaching the sand of the beach and carrying little sand grains into the depths of the ocean, evokes a rather unsettling feeling: "like one element trying to secretly steal from another" (Alexander 2015, 72). This line suggests the way the hypnotizing visualization of the waves' movement literally steals the passing of time, the "minute lengthening of the day", as the sea steals the sand grains from the shore without being noticed. Following this line of interpretation, the speaker in Alexander's poem is describing a moment of existentialist crisis that can be clearly connected to Millennials' adulthood-life crisis nowadays, which echoes a nihilistic tone in the following lines: "before you fall asleep, remember – / literally nothing you do matters" (Alexander 2015, 72). This breaking point, splitting the poem into two differentiated parts, remarks the way the movement of the "waves" leads the viewer into a hypnotic trance of sleepiness, as if nothing else mattered at that very moment. This state carries the speaker into a moment of self-awareness, a dark awakening that radically differs from that of Edna's experience with the sea swimming scene described before. Furthermore, the "ocean waves" represents the subconscious part of the self, and relating this to the next stanza, these represent the fears, the insecurities and the worries that assault a person with insomnia "late at night", which undermine the self-esteem and hopes of the individual.

This metaphor emphasizes the irrelevance of human existence and the little importance of the individual in a mass society and culture, as Han describes in the following quote from *The Burnout Society*: "One feels exhausted, bored and tired of fighting against oneself. Totally unable of going out of oneself, of being outside oneself, of trusting in the (an)other and in the world, one insists on oneself, which drives one, paradoxically, towards the piercing and emptying of the ego." (Han 2010b, 1?) This nihilistic vision of life is confirmed by the ironic tone of the Alexander's next lines: "I am sorry if you expected / something differently of this world" (Alexander 2015, 72)

The expression of ‘I am sorry but not sorry at all’ depicts a plain gesture of politeness whose over-use by English speakers empties it from a literal meaning in relation to the expression of genuine emotions, and instead Alexander uses this expression in order to refer to the harshness of adulthood and the competitive world we live in. This *cliché* shows up the instability that these emerging generations have to face in order to survive at the exigencies of the world and from the self, facing the expectations that leaves you empty, like the “ocean waves ... trying to secretly steal” (Alexander 2015, 72) the soul and the energies of a person, towards total exhaustion: what Han called the *burnout*.

Many sociologists have shown their interest in analyzing the determining factors of contemporary societies that have led a whole generation, that of the Millennials, into the global pandemic of *loneliness*, as a pathology as common nowadays as it once was *hysteria* or *neurosis*. In 2018, a report made by *Cigna*, a US health insurance company, concluded that between a 46-47% of the people who took their survey reported to “[...] always feel alone and/or feeling left out” (Cigna 2018, 3) Years before, Stravos J. Baloyannis already identified in *The philosophy of solitude* as a pattern of “isolation of the young generation” that he interpreted as a result of a “desire to escaping from a traumatic social reality” towards “the rescuing in the anonymous horizon of the electronic world” (Baloyannis 2015, 17) He claimed that the possible effects of this seclusion in the virtual world lead many to experience “sadness, anxiety, insecurity” that is almost unbearable to “sustain” for some (Baloyannis 2015, 17) Considering these shocking revelations linking isolation and the virtual to the pathologization of *loneliness* makes us reflect on whether radical individualism is compatible to our social nature. As Aristotles warned about how “the outcast”’s behavior can be closely related to violence: “a lover of war; he may be compared to an unprotected piece in the game of draughts” (Aristotles 1920, 28). This is likely to be true since isolation leads to mistrust and paranoia about our surroundings and makes us more prone to the indiscriminate exercise of violence. Hannah Arendt argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that *loneliness* is the “loss of one’s self”, as the epitome of loss of “trusting and trustworthy company” of others (Arendt 1962, 477), which in return affects our sense of belonging and self-worth respecting our position as individuals in society: “self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.” (Arendt 1962, 477) But, how this sense of *loneliness* is connected to creativity nowadays? And, how this affects women’s writing in the isolating Digital Age? Now, we are going to explore this issue of loneliness in relation to food and drug abuse.

3.2. Post-Prozac Generation: the p03tic[s] of (de)pressive resistance

I want to feel what I feel. What's mine. Even if it's not happiness, whatever that means. Because you're all you've got- Toni Morrison (*The Guardian*, 2012)⁵⁹

There are all kinds of addicts, I guess. We all have pain. And we all look for ways to make the pain go away. – Sherman Alexie (*The Absolutely True diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 90)

As we have seen in *20MG/DAY*, Gabby Bess establishes a direct relationship between depression and artistic creation. At the middle part of the poem, the poetic voice states that “I feel like my anti-depressants are working” (Bess 2013, 59), but what seems paradoxical is the fact that despite taking medication, the effects on her are not the expected ones since she ends up “cry(ing) quietly into them” (Bess 2013, 59): are the anti-depressants really working? In Bess’ poem, there seems to be this longing for something one does not quite know well, as if the boundaries between mental stability and mental collapse are blurry, sometimes even overlapping each other. As a result, the politics of compulsory wellness involved in the new trends displayed on social media, the accessibility to them and the social acceptance of having aspirations for happiness, perfection and its relation to online success, populate visually alluring platforms such as *Instagram* or *Facebook*, which seem to encourage people to perform an idealized, even fake, role online. Reality does not fit these standards, and therefore, provokes a series of anxieties and conflicts that poets, who are also paradoxically popular in the Internet, such as Mira Gonzalez, Gabby Bess, Melissa Broder and Sarah Jean Alexander, reflect on their poems about the connection between mental illness and these new forms of reality and online expectations about what happiness truly means nowadays.

In this section, I pay attention to the relationship between what it is supposed to feel good with oneself: according to these trends in which the displays of happiness and a balanced life imply a contrast with the angst and a sense of *loneliness* in the material world, and which results from our digital lives and social interactions online. Also, I explore the following issues: are these poems the poetic embodiment of a sense of individual vulnerability that results from the imposition of a collective vision about what happiness should look like? Is this digital marketing about happiness a new form of digital isolation that leads towards alienation, and hence *loneliness*, in “real life”? How do these new forms of poetry represent mental illness as a reaction to this new trend of compulsory wellness in the digital era? How does the use of prescription and recreative drugs help these lonely individuals repair the self in their lack of normalcy?

⁵⁹ *Interview of Toni Morrison: ‘I want to feel what I feel. Even if it’s not happiness’* by Emma Brockes (*The Guardian*, 13th April 2012): <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/13/toni-morrison-home-son-love>

3.2.1. An approach to the Pharmaco-politics of Happiness: The Genesis of Compulsive Wellness

The obsession about images displayed on social media can be related to what Debord predicted in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), as a new form of language that lacks a deep and complex meaning and content, but they allure the audiences with their attractive surfaces, being an example of this the images and language employed in advertisements:

The spectacle is a permanent opium war waged to make it impossible to distinguish goods from commodities, or true satisfaction from a survival that increases according to its own logic. Consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation. (Debord 1994, 30)

We can understand Debord's notion of "consumable survival" in relation to happiness and consumerism by using Runciman's notion of "relative deprivation." This is basically based on the presupposition of that "people's attitudes, aspirations and grievances largely depend on the frame of reference within which they are conceived" (Runciman 1966, 9), a fact that conditions the "person's satisfaction" through a series of "expectations," that originally comes from consciously contrasting "one's situation with that of others worse off than oneself," (Runciman 1966, 9) or, as such it is the case for happiness, with those who are better off than oneself. The gap created between "the desired situation and that of the person desiring it" produces this sense of "deprivation" that, as it will be later explained, results from comparing one's "lacking something" to "the imagined situation of some other person or group," (Runciman 1966, 10-11) as Runciman argues. In a highly capitalist society as the American one is, this sense of deprivation is enhanced by the fact that there is an impossible realization and materialization of a certain set of values that are directly linked to an idealized situation of social acceptance: at any cost, the pursuit of "happiness" is seen as the new ultimate value, as it is shown as a simulation of what society and culture understands as "happiness" through a series of material, physical and emotional tropes displayed on social media. As Merton explains in his essay *Social Structure and Anomie* (1938), "antisocial behavior" or "deviate behavior" emerges from what the culture defines as a valuable success. This also implies the way social-class structures limit the access of "approved opportunities for legitimate, prestige-bearing pursuit" (Merton 1938, 680) of what is socially and culturally accepted, as he describes more extensively in the following fragment:

Frustration and thwarted aspiration lead to the search of avenues of scape from a culturally induced intolerable situation: or unrelieved ambition may eventually in illicit attempts to acquire the dominant values. The American stress on pecuniary

success and ambitiousness for all thus invites exaggerated anxieties, hostilities, neuroses and antisocial behavior. (Merton 1938, 680)

But before continuing with the implications of this imposition of “happiness” and the creation of what “deviation” from its norm is, I shall briefly look up about how the term “happiness” is being defined, described and researched in recent years. Initially, at the end of the 18th century, John Stuart Mill conceptualized the term *utilitarianism* in relation to the “happiness principle,” which is closely connected to the experience of “pleasure, and the absence of pain,” since happiness is seen as a desirable goal for the pursuit of wholeness and completeness of the individual, closely related to a conceptualization of inherent goodness. (Mill 1963, 5) On the other hand, Immanuel Kant argued in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) that pursuing happiness as a life goal is counter-productive to the means of the individual’s purpose in life: to put it more clearly, it seems like happiness becomes a simultaneously waste of time and of one’s own energies, an exhausting and yet unfeasible task. His argument is based on how happiness goes against reason since it is a product of the imagination, an ideal unable to attain in a practical world (Kant 1964, 86), due to its indeterminacy for being measured and for being tracked as a continuum:

[...] although every man wants to attain happiness, he can never say definitely and in unison with himself what really is that he wants and wills. [...] there is required for the Idea of happiness an absolute whole, a maximum of well-being in my present, and in every future. Now it is impossible for the most intelligent, and at the same time most powerful, but nevertheless finite, being to form here a determinate concept of what he really wills. (Kant 1964, 85)

In the 20th century, the *utilitarian* view was also contested by McMahon, who criticized the “search for happiness” in our contemporary society from a capitalistic perspective, “as a form of possession - possession by an alien that moves through us” (McMahon 2006, 15): this basically means that we cannot decide whether we can control achieving happiness, by suggesting that it is imposed as the major goal in our lives, and which also becomes a common end as a society, as Merton also described. This also implies that it can potentially produce its own counter-goals, in the “form(s) of discontent,” (Ahmed 2010, 195) that may potentially undo the realization of happiness itself. But as Sara Ahmed suggests, these “form(s) of discontent,” that presupposes an opposition to happiness, can be turned into a form of resilience against the social and cultural imposition of positivity: this would imply the right to be “unhappy” by living through “acts of deviation” (Ahmed 2010, 195) which are forms of resistance against the tyranny of compulsory “happiness” and “positivity.”

In this context of counter-happiness, I would like to present the poems written by *Alt [C]Lit* writers in order to address these issues through which we can rethink happiness in relation to normalcy, mental health, addiction and drug medication. One can call this new industry that of “pharmaco-happiness,” which is clearly inspired on Foucault’s notion of “biopolitics.” This must be understood as the way through which happiness has been exploited in order to establish the parameters of standard “normality” to evaluate mental stability and the individual’s general wellness. In *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault 1995, 76), Foucault first introduces the term of biopolitics as a form of new technological form of surveillance of the body. This idea will be developed later in *Discipline and Punishment*, described as a tool for “normalizing society” by intersecting “the norm of discipline” with “the norm of regulation,” and by applying a series of procedures in “which bodies are replaced by general biological processes.” (Foucault 2003, 253) This new form of understanding the body as a socially shared biological process is potentially threatening not only for the individual, but also for the collectivity of the society as a whole, as Foucault argued:

And we also have a second technology which is centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass, a technology which tries to predict the probability of those events (by modifying it, if necessary), or at least to compensate of those events. (Foucault 2003, 249)

According to Paul B. Preciado, “the body of the consumer” has become a “prison cell,” (Preciado 2013, 205) that is governed by new “techniques of social control” which aim for the “modification of their bodies in their capacity as living platforms.” (Preciado 2013, 211), as he explains in *Testo Junkie*. This form of “social control” is being currently exercised by the pharmaceutical industry using medication and drugs. This potentially provides people the opportunity to control and to modify their body and mind through the possibilities offered by a larger system of consumption, that includes that one of pharmaceuticals, among others. Taking Preciado’s analysis of the sexual politics involved in the distribution of hormones and the pill in concerning the normalization of processes of masculinization and feminization of the population, one can argue that prescription drugs, which are used to treat mental health disorders, are another type of pharmaco-artifacts that “can create physical formations that become integrated with vaster political organisms” (Preciado 2013, 191). These “vaster political organisms” are what Preciado identifies as “medical-legal institutions, the nation-states, or global networks” that help to the legal circulation and accessibility to this kind of pharmaco-capital (Preciado 2013, 191). Also, this

implies that sciences, in particular those related to health, have established a series of parameters of what a normal or healthy body should look like, which also applies to the mind. In relation to “happiness,” being or feeling happy has been established as a parameter to evaluate the individual’s mental health, becoming the major goal or aspiration to feel good about oneself. Following this idea, the next set of selected poems are going to provide new views about the anxieties resulting from pursuing the wellness of normality, and how prescription drugs are used in order to alter the mind and the body to achieve this desired state of happiness and wholeness.

3.2.2. F33d M3: The impo\$\$ible ING-esti0n of wØrds

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, I would like to analyze different parts of poems and other pieces of writing produced by *Alt [C]Lit writers* such as Sarah Jean Alexander, Melissa Broder, Ana Carrete and Mira Gonzalez. In order to study the topic of compulsory happiness in the context of the compulsive consumption of prescription drugs, I will firstly establish an analogy between the relevance of food ingestion and its derived pathologies considering Melanie Klein’s hypothesis on ‘the *psychogenesis of manic-depressive states*’ (1935). For Klein, the ego’s early development is determined by the way the psyche establishes a series of relations with Other(s) in a concrete environment or circumstance, a determining factor which is known as *the Object Relation Theory*. In her paper *Weaning* (1936), Klein explains how the child identifies the objects that surround her as either good or bad, depending on whether these objects are loving and gratifying, or frustrating and damaging (Klein 1975, 290). In fact, the prototype of the object with which the child’s ego firstly identifies is her mother’s breasts, since this one is intimately connected to the process of food ingestion and hence her own survival: “The first gratification which the child derives from the external world is the satisfaction experienced in being fed.” (Klein 1975, 290). Hence, the breasts become the earliest phantasy’s projection of internal and external bad qualities as well as the introjection of both good ones through the phantasy-projection of the antagonistic figures of the bad and the good mother.

This projection will be translated as the bad or the good objects in later stages of the ego’s development into adulthood, as Klein describes in *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States* (Klein 1975, 285). This process mixes up with the child’s anxiety and fear for her own annihilation, making her develop a series of psychological defense mechanisms, such as that of splitting and that of scotomization, to protect the ego from the threatening presence of the bad breast and to control both good and bad breasts as separate objects, by simultaneously employing

the processes of projection and integration for such task. Therefore, the ideas of perfection and disintegration are intimately connected to each other through the “sublimation of the bits which the loved object has been reduced and the effort to put them together.” (Klein 1975, 270) The processes of splitting and disintegration are motivated by the child’s inability to cope with the fact that both good and bad entities can be integrated into a single one. As a result, paranoia and depression may arise as an attempt of being, and so to cope with feelings of anxiety and fear for preserving the good object(s) and for destroying the bad one(s). What is also interesting to point out from Klein’s theoretical remarks on the generation of mania is how this one is connected to food ingestion, which is a symptom of a desperate need for incorporating good objects through mimicking breast feeding as the primal manifestation of the child’s need for survival, both physiologically and psychologically:

To begin with, the breast of the mother is the object of his constant desire, and therefore this is the first thing to be introjected. In phantasy the child sucks the breasts into himself, chews it up and swallows it; thus he feels that he has actually got it there, that he possesses the mother’s breast within himself, in both its good and its bad aspects. (Klein 1975, 291)

In *Weaning*, Klein takes as a principle Freud’s oral stage in relation to feeding in order to explain the relationship between the mother’s breast and the formation of the ego’s good and bad objects: the pleasure and the frustration the child derives from their presence or absence are key elements in the development of the unconscious. The mouth represents “[...] the main channel through which the child takes in not only his food, but also in his phantasy, the world outside him.” (Klein 1975, 291) Through *introjection*, the external objects become part of his internal ones through a constant process of perception. The desire the child has for her mother’s breasts is mediated by the gratifying sensations originated in the process of breast-feeding, as well as the negative ones when his desire is negated by the absence of the breasts. Hence, attachment and libidinal projections are produced at this stage to produce a narcissistic identification between the ego and the object that would encourage this cannibalistic incorporation. Later, in the *Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States*, Klein claims that “the hunger of objects” is intimately related to “the introjection of good objects.” (Klein 1975, 278) Freud described mania as the triumph of the ego over “the loss of the object” (Freud 1948, 255), generating a series of states similar to those of “joy, exultation or triumph” (Freud 1948, 254) that will be expressed as a form of “liberation from the object which was the cause of his suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man for new object-cathexes” (Freud 1948, 254). This means that the ego, once it has

overcome from mourning, expresses his need for a new object-relations to substitute the previous loss. It also is interesting to note the parallelism that Freud makes between this cannibalistic hunger and the new urge for introjecting new objects. This hypothesis can be applied to analyze Sarah Jean Alexander's poem "Challenge"⁶⁰ (2015, 55), which starts like this:

Any time I lose something
Important in my life
I like to fill the new formed void
With really loud and abrasive foods. (Alexander 2015, 55)

Alexander compares the loss of the loved object with a "new formed void", that needs to be "fill(ed) [...] with really loud and abrasive foods" (2015, 55): these "loud and abrasive foods" can be identified with prototypes of "bad objects" since the adjectives employed to qualify these foods have negative connotations. Klein will identify this kind of self-destructive behavior as a form of manic denial of "different forms of anxiety associated with this introjection" (Klein 1975, 278): this denial is manifested in the implicit danger of consciously incorporating toxic objects, which can be either the consumption of bad foods, alcohol or drugs in excess. The expression "cannibalistic way" applies to this uncontrolled consumption expressed as a mania which can be either related to a "defense-mechanism of the depressive position" (Klein 1975, 278), as Klein would argue, or as a proof of "liberation" (Freud 1948, 255), as Freud would defend. In any case, the poetic voice of Alexander's poem transforms this pain into a grotesque spectacle from which she wants everyone to participate as voyeuristic accomplices: "I want everyone to know I'm coming" (Alexander 2015, 55). The imperative use of verbs related to the four of senses are directly involved with food ingestion, like "hear me chomping," "see me chewing,"⁶¹ "taste the snowflake-flecks of cauliflower spewing from my



SARAH JEAN ALEXANDER EATING STREET FOOD.

⁶⁰ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 294](#).

⁶¹ **Alexander** made a series of personal and pseudo-artistic videos published at her **YouTube account** in which she is shown doing what is called '**Booze Art**' with some of her friends, which mainly consists on drinking a can of beer in one sip. Here there is an example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnbVsK7Swps>



ANA CARRETE EATING PIZZA.

conversation,” (Alexander 2015, 55): all these evocative practices have a sensorial effect on the reader that create a simulation of common bodily experiences. In fact, there is an urge for an exchange of this experience in the lines “spewing from my conversation and into yours” (Alexander 2015, 55): the fusion between food eating and language production are perfectly implied as part of human communication and relations, the basis between libidinal projections of our phantasies about

the external world.

Also, other *Alt [C]Lit* author Ana Carrete, as shown here in the picture belonging to her *Tumblr* webpage⁶², joins the aesthetics of food-bonding, especially that one in which she takes selfies of eating alone junk food such as pizza, instant ramen, or even drinking beer or soda. In her chapbook *make-believe love making* (2011), the poem “adcdeFML*”⁶³, in which the desire for eating and sexual pulsions emerge simultaneously as they are difficult to discern from each other:

my stomach growls
when you kiss me [...]
so i concentrate on the good things
like the actual kiss
or the doughnuts we’ll eat later (Carrete 2011, 8)

It seems that food consumption translates into the consumption of an alien body, either that of the other person or the “doughnuts”, so Carrete ironically plays with both acts in the form of parodic parallelism, juxtaposing hunger with that of sexual desire. One can relate both Alexander’s and Carrete’s visual exhibitionism of food-eating, explicitly implied in the final imperative of Alexander’s line “*watch me*” (Alexander 2015, 55) in “Challenge”, with an Internet trend that has become popularized in South Korea⁶⁴ since 2010: *Mukbang*. This word is the combination of

⁶² Ana Carrete’s *Tumblr* webpage: <https://anacarretecortes.tumblr.com/page/7>

⁶³ The complete poem can be found in *Appendix 2*, page 312.

⁶⁴ It is interesting to note that **Sarah Jean Alexander** herself is half Korean by her mother’s side. Whether this is parallelism is a deliberate or unconscious coincide, it is interesting to see a cultural connection that arises from Alexander’s multicultural family background.

Korean words *meokneun*, which means “eating”, and *bangsong*, that is “broadcast”: the compound Korean word perfectly synthesizes the online broadcast of eating large amounts of well-known junk food while interacting with an audience, who also tips the show. Therefore, there are famous Korean *mukbang* hosts who are broadcasting professionally as a way of obtaining an income through their popular shows in media platforms such as *Afreeca TV*, *Twitch* or *YouTube*. The success of *mukbang* has trespassed the Korean borders to become also popularized throughout the world by encouraging other non-Korean hosts to join *mukbang* as a means of making a living out of it.



KOREAN BJ MUKBANG BROADCASTING HER SHOW.

Researchers Seok-Kyeong Hong and Sojeoung Park have studied and analyzed this new phenomenon to explain the reasons for its success as a new form of entertainment. This one has exclusively originated from the needs of newer generations immersed in Internet subcultures, belonging to a particular common social context. As Hong and Park have explain, “food is closely related to one’s identity” (Hong & Park 2017, 111), an statement which makes us reflect on the importance of visual representation of reality that serves to connect *off* and *on*-line worlds through food bonding: the recreation of sensations derived from the pleasure of food consumption, such as the description of taste, the sounds of chewing, slurping and moaning, and the visual presentation of huge quantities of tasty-looking foods, stimulates the audiences into engaging the feast by the sophisticated use of webcam and microphones in order to compensate the lack of real tasting experience. This is what Hong and Park have denominated as the fulfillment of “physical and sentimental hunger of single-person households” (Hong & Park 2017, 118) that commonly prevails

in the configuration of Millennial generations worldwide:

“[...] a new system of value regarding the food culture, even though it is contrary to the justified and consensual values of good nutrition. This proves how powerful the influence of the Internet media culture on contemporary Korean society is. *Mukbang*, marked by its special expressivity, resonates with the social and communicational needs of the surplusage generation, the majority of them living alone and eating alone. The generational dimension of Internet mukbang and its anti-conventional aesthetics and ethics toward the body and the diet permit us to interpret it as a unique subcultural practice.” (Hong & Park 2017, 122)

Melissa Broder has also a poem on the performativity of *live eating* which has a futuristic vision about the relationship between food consumption and social bonding: “binge eating in 2067”⁶⁵ from *Meat Heart* (2012, 16-17). This piece echoes Broder’s struggles with eating disorders, in particular bulimia, as she explains in *So Sad Today*: “Let me continue to live under these self-imposed systems of diet ice cream, where I can have some of what I enjoy about binge eating – just without my mind destroying me after.” (Broder 2015, 16) As Broder claims in the poem, “the Wild Mand is just like me / starved into fractions” (Broder 2012, 16): the fragmentation of the self seems to be reconstituted through the incorporation of other elements, such as food, in order to cope with other type of anxieties. But also, the speaker of the poem makes it evident that there are also differences in the eating styles and routines of people: “But I have a jaw that seeks chunks / and he has the heart of a fat man” (Broder 2012, 16). Their ways of eating seem to be a metaphor on their ways of coping with reality: whether in a fragmentary way, “seek(ing) chunks”, or wholly by being gluttonous, like a “fat man”: coping with reality, consuming the bits of reality one is offering, simulates how we eat food. It also mimics the way we interact with each other, as an expression of sexual desire and one’s longing for connection with the other, represented in the insertion of our bodily fragmented parts into the holes of another’s, as it is shown at the ending lines in Broder’s poem:

When he cooks a real live cassoulet
Flesh and fat, no hoaw,

I turn my face from the bowl
And put my fingers in his mouth. (Broder 2012, 17)

Related to the importance of the bodily experience of eating, Alexander connects the effects

⁶⁵ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 306](#).

of food with the workings of her own body through physical motion and experimentation:

I want to become aware

Of the motions of my body

In ways I didn't know I could feel. (Alexander 2015, 55)

Feeling seems to be a common obsession for *Alt [C]Lit* poets when speaking of the body and related experiences of sensations derived from it. There seems to be a pathological disconnection between the feeling, the body and the linguistic reasoning that arises from this triangular intersection that becomes a poetic dissection of a body emptied from its emotions, which are transferred into a different dimension, that one of the virtual realm. What is interesting to specify in Carrete's and Alexander's cases, compulsive *mukbang* must be also considered a kind of [un]conscious rebellion, even a terrorist attack, against dietary recommendations that attempts to discipline the female body into a determined and desired shape by the imperative imposition of a

'healthy lifestyle,' so much promoted by the soft-core and photoshopped pornography of fit and unrealistic bodies of *Instagram* models. On the other hand, we have Mira Gonzalez's antagonistic attitude towards food consumption in a series of poems that directly addresses this issue. In 2014, Gonzalez published a personal article, *An Unmotivated Person's Guide to Body Dysmorphia*, in which she explicitly narrates her constant struggle with accepting her body image: "I was



MIRA GONZALEZ REPRESENTING HER BODY
DYSMORPHIA AND HER LOVE FOR JUNK FOOD.

desperate to feel comfortable enough with my own body to join my classmates in their classes, or to be able to go to pool parties without it being a traumatizing experience that would inevitably end in tears." (*Otherppl*, 23rd March 2014) As she confesses, she thinks that people perceive her as an "average girl" that "fluctuate within the spectrum of 'normal' weight" (*Otherppl*, 23rd March 2014); but her main problem relies on the way she perceives herself: that's why she thinks that the way she feels about her body is more connected to a disturbed perception that makes her unsatisfied towards her own bodily image: "I've always felt bigger than most people." (*Otherppl*, 23rd March 2014). It seems apparently evident that the major focus of Gonzalez's bodily obsessions is directed towards her stomach area, as it is described in the form of childhood traumatic memories in the

following fragment from her article:

I have a vivid memory of standing in front of a mirror at my dad's house. It was the only mirror in his house where I could see my whole body without standing on a stool. I was 8 years old. I sucked in my stomach then stuck it out far enough that I looked pregnant. I fantasized about some kind of vacuum sucking the childish mound of fat off my abdomen, or a giant meat cleaver coming down from the sky and chopping it clean off. (*Otherpppl* 23rd March 2014)

It is interesting the fact that the stomach is an area directly connected to food ingestion and storage, and, at the same time, it becomes the focus of many dietary and physical exercises in order to reduce its fat accumulation, and hence, its size. The paradox of consumption in a food-surplus society as the US is made evident in the way that food disorders are very much connected to a narcissistic vision of a body that has become a visual medium rather than a survival entity. In the poem "self-defeating personality disorder"⁶⁶ (Gonzalez 2013, 18), Gonzalez points towards how her unsettling feelings and anxieties basically originate from this zone of her body: "a few visceral emotions / creating a small and heavy thing/ this idea in my stomach" (Gonzalez 2013, 18) Here, we see another disconnection between an emotion and an idea by how she locates the process of feeling ("visceral emotions") in parallel to that of reasoning ("idea") in her "stomach." The title, "self-defeating personality," seems to echo Freud's definition of melancholia:

"[...] a disposition to obsessional neurosis [...] gives a pathological cast to mourning and forces it to express itself in the form of self-reproaches to the effect that mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved object, i.e. that he has willed it." (Freud 1948, 251)

What the poetic voice of Gonzalez's poem seems to express is the confusion she feels about the causes originating this feeling, as it is over-stated again by the end of the poem: "can you feel this permanent concept beneath my ribcage" (Gonzalez 2013, 18) This line confirms what this analysis has previously stated: that the use of synesthetic experiences in order to emphasize this dissociative state arises from a melancholic position. It seems to be that as the poetic voice is unable to identify what is the lost loved-object, she also is unable to process the mourning of that unknown lost love-object. But still, the ego cannot avoid feeling a loss that is still there, like "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego" (Freud 1948, 248), as Freud would claim. The inability to process feelings, or even 'digest' them, explains metaphorically this constant obsession towards her

⁶⁶ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 320](#).

stomach, that brings us back to the hypothesis of dissociation and the ingestion of food as a metaphor to the incorporation of “emotions”-objects. In “I am going to stop eating”⁶⁷ (Gonzalez 2013, 48), there is a longing for achieving a catatonic state, that “*schizo body*” which Deleuze describes extensively in the *How Do You Make Yourself a Body Without Organs* (Deleuze 2005, 150): a body that actively avoids getting involved with the constant conflict she keeps with her internal objects by “stopping” all internal activity of the body. Also, this negation of the conflict is more evident in the line “I want to snort ambien”: *Ambien*⁶⁸ is a type of benzodiazepine used for treating insomnia, and one can read this urgent need for sleeping as a strategy to avoid this internal confrontation by totally shutting down, literally.

Now that the implications of food ingestion have been explored in this section, I will continue applying Klein’s claims in relation to the drug ingestion. In particular, I shall focus this reading on the consumption of prescriptive drugs in relation to the depressive and schizoid positions, which are manifested in some of the *Alt [C]Lit* poems which have been selected for this particular section.

3.2.3. (Y)unkie[s] of Emo-tion\$: addictive fulfilling of the paranoid void

I would like to start this section by analyzing Gonzalez’s poem “in public spaces you sit or stand quietly,” (Gonzalez 2013, 42) which belongs to *I will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together*, in order to introduce the topic of drug abuse and the object-relation theory by continuing Melanie Klein’s hypothesis of introjection and incorporation of objects. The tone of her poetry is one of the most interesting features of her writing, as Hannah Manshel makes a commentary on this feature at “Depthless Psychology,” and refers to Gonzalez’s poetic tone in terms of “flatness.” At her article, Manshel defines such term as being “... characterized by non-expressive emotion and seems to aspire toward emotional neutrality, toward an impossible balance between the vulnerability of emotion and the anesthesia of affectlessness.” (Manshel 7th July 2014, *The New Inquiry*) The poem, “in public places you sit or stand quietly,”⁶⁹ starts off by focusing on the way certain people live their lives without drawing attention to themselves, in order not to be seen, heard or even perceived, as it is clearly stated in the first line: “you try to not draw

⁶⁷ The complete poem can be found in Appendix 2, page 320.

⁶⁸ *Ambien*’s effects: <https://drugabuse.com/5-scary-effects-of-ambien/>

⁶⁹ The complete poem can be found in Appendix 2, page 320.

attention.” (Gonzalez 2013, 42) In order to become invisible, one of Gonzalez’ strategies is to “sit” or “stand quietly,” which clearly brings us to reconsider Merleau-Ponty’s theory on the *Phenomenology of Perception*, in which he conceives the body as primarily in motion:

By considering the body in movement, we can see better how it inhabits space (and, moreover, time) because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaceness of established situations.(Merleu-Ponty 2005, 117)

In this sense, the speaker’s attempts to not be noticed seem clearly motivated by this notion of the body in relation to movement in order to exist in spatial terms, which also turns into the possibility of being perceived by others, which is what Gonzalez obsesses about in this poem: the persecutory feelings of being observed or even seen by strangers. As Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punishment*, “visibility is a trap,” (Foucault 1995, 200) and this paranoid obsession towards not being seen is clearly stated in that line, as well as in the poem. This could be a symptom of paranoia, which also arises anxiety in the speaker about the impossibility to socially fit in terms of behavior. In order to solve this issue, one of the other strategies that the voice employs is to normalize her behavior by being “considerate and polite in social situations,” avoiding “certain opinions and expressing other ones,” or allowing “people to project appealing qualities onto you” (Gonzalez 2013, 42), so she can pretend to behave as a ‘normal’ person.

As Sara Ahmed points out at *The Promise of Happiness*, “happiness involves developing a certain kind of disposition,” that is to allow oneself to be influenced by certain modes of perception on our behavior, since “unhappy people are represented as deprived, unsociable and neurotic” (Ahmed 2010, 8-9). Therefore, happiness becomes a new form of communal relation that involves dependence and control between individuals. This fact can potentially alienate one from each other, even to the point of turning someone paranoid due to the feeling of being under constant surveillance by the rest of people, which is the case that Gonzalez presents in this poem. The obsession about normality associated to the idea of “happiness” and “wellness,” which is basically based on the notion of mental health, is presented in relation to mental and physical stability. In this sense, we can recall the importance of images as tools of psychological control, as Foucault proposes as part of the notion of the *Panopticon*, which relies in the idea of “the exercise of power may be supervised by society as whole.” (Foucault 1995, 207) This problematizes the notion of “surveillance” as being employed as an unconscious practice that is collectively used. Nowadays, this idea can be associated to the role that social media platforms, such as *Facebook* or *Instagram*,

which are used as a form of light and shallow spectacles that also engages with other forms of psychological control that mediate our forms of both perception and interaction with each other by judging other people's attitudes or ways of moving or behaving:

Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; [...] the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. (Foucault 1995, 217)

Now, what I would like to draw our attention in this poem is to the depiction of drugs usage that the speaker makes, and the way it affects her behavior depending on the mood she wants to achieve: "you take drugs because they make you feel different." (Gonzalez 2013, 16) This line points out to the problematics of pharmaco-dependency, in which people who do not necessarily need prescription pills make use of them in order to feel in a certain way. This seems to be connected to a contemporary obsession of artificially controlling our bodies and emotions, for either bad or good, as Preciado points out in *Testo Junkie*. Along the poem, one can perceive a recurrent use of the pronoun "you" substituting the "I" in order to refer to the voice of the poem. This is a characteristic that can be associated to a dissociative mode in which the individual separates from one own's experiences as if these weren't hers, by becoming an observer or spectator of them, or, as Itzkowitz describe: as a form of "psychic fragmentation, a type of alienation from inner experiences, in the Horneyan perspective, becomes a way to cope with early, chronic, disruptive and painful experiences and an adaptation to the traumatizing environment." (Itzkowitz 2015, 146) This is also known as *dissociative identity disorder* from a clinical perspective.

In this sense, I am interested in analyzing Gonzalez's explicit references towards drug consumption in order to alter her bodily and mental states and experiences. In order to analyze the ingestion of drugs, we can also take Klein's account on "food ingestion" in relation to the depressive position as an attempt for describing such gesture. The purpose for taking the "drugs" makes explicit the poetic voice's intention of transforming herself, or to "make (herself) feel different" (Gonzalez 2013, 42): this can be interpreted as a form of changing internal objects, either good or bad, by substituting them for external objects (good or bad) through the incorporation by ingestion and/or introjection of those objects, which are the pills or the drugs she might be taking. In order to understand the intentions for taking those particular drugs, one shall first take a look into

the drugs which are mentioned at the poem so it can be discerned in more depth what the poetic voice is trying to convey by making an explicit reference to them.

The first drug we are introduced in the poem are *Benzodiazepines*⁷⁰. These are psychoactive drugs used for treating anxiety, insomnia, agitation, seizures, muscle spasms, alcohol withdrawal and for medical or dental procedures, which produce aggression or behavioral disinhibition, or like Gonzalez writes: “make you feel detached, affectionate as if your opinions and desires exist independently of you”. (Gonzalez 2013, 42) The second one, *Amphetamines*⁷¹, are a CNS⁷² stimulant used as a treatment of ADHD⁷³ and narcolepsy, and their recreational use can lead to euphoric states, that “make you feel thinner, more sociable.” (Gonzalez 2013, 42) This shows, somehow, the way Gonzalez perceives herself as struggling between keeping a balance between being able to incorporate external good and bad objects, and also to control the anxiety that arises from the depressive position that substituting her internal objects produce: “you are equally compelled by experiences with extremely positive or extremely negative outcomes.” (Gonzalez 2013, 42) Also, it is important to point out an apparently inability, or lack of interest, in discerning whether the objects she is ingesting are either good or bad, and the possible consequences of this action, not only in the long term but in the immediate future.

In another of Gonzalez’s poem “mcsweeney’s caused global warming”⁷⁴ (2013, 16), one continues realizing the importance of the fact that the poetic voice constantly establishes a direct connection between human relations, as object-relations, with the compulsive consumption of prescription drugs, as incorporating these object-relations through a phantasy projection of the ego onto them. At first, the poetic voice introduces the reader with an analytic attitude that is describing her feelings from a detached point of view: “lately I have been watching this emotion cautiously, from a safe distance” (Gonzalez 2013, 16). Instead of using the verb “to feel” she employs “to watch”, as if that emotion wasn’t happening to her and she was a mere spectator of her own internal experiences. To add up, she reinforces this vision by stating that she is fully conscious of this emotional detachment from her body. The poetic voice seems to be undergoing a process of

⁷⁰ *Benzodiazepines*: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfoforall/treatments/benzodiazepines.aspx>

⁷¹ *Amphetamine*: <https://www.drugs.com/amphetamine.html>

⁷² CNS stands for central nervous system.

⁷³ ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

⁷⁴ The complete poem can be found in Appendix 2, page 321.

‘splitting’ as a defense mechanism, which is a form of dissociating herself from her own internal object, which is this “emotion”, and avoiding the conflicting experience this one may arise in her. Gonzalez constantly plays with the ambiguity of the words she employs in this poem at various levels: first, in the line “to consume your entire body” (Gonzalez 2013, 16) could mean to eat, to use up, destroy or take over that body. As Klein pointed out, the cannibalistic phantasy does not only provide “gratification,” but it also provides a sense of control to the ego over the “internalized loved objects” (Klein 1975, 287), the narcissistic-schizoid dream of mastering and omnipresence.

In this case, we can confirm that Gonzalez is describing a sexual encounter, because of the passive action of “lying down on top of you and breathing very hard” (Gonzalez 2013, 16) and referring to this encounter as a “way of osmosis” (Gonzalez 2013, 16). Osmosis is directly connected to water and consists of the interchange of a solvent across a semipermeable membrane towards a higher concentration of solute, which stands as a metaphor for the sexual interchange of fluids by intercourse. Right after, there is a radical change in tone, and the effects of post-sex on the protagonist are described as: “and your fingers / has caused me to experience extremely positive feelings / also anxiety and severe depression” (Gonzalez 2013, 16) Gonzalez convincingly contrasts a series of mixed and contradictory feelings, which is a characteristic feature of her poetry. Also, to conclude with, Gonzalez mentions again the use of a prescription drug, *Adderall*⁷⁵, which is a popular one used for mainly treating ADHD: “I am concentrating on becoming 40mg of adderall right now” (Gonzalez 2013, 16) What is interesting to note is that *Adderall* is used as a recreative drug for pursuing euphoric and aphrodisiac states: the fact that she mentions that she has to become *Adderall* to enjoy the sexual experience confirms the dissociative state in which her mind and body are undergoing as separate entities which are not connected through “this emotion” that she refers to at the beginning of the poem. She wants to be *Adderall* to feel euphoric, erotically engaged in a sexual intercourse: she wants to fix her feelings of “also anxiety and severe depression” (Gonzalez 2013, 16) she is having instead.

But Gonzalez is not the only Alt [C]Lit writer that makes explicit allusions to prescription drugs in order to explore her identity and mental health. In *So Sad Today* (2016) by Melissa Broder, the author confesses her tug-of-war relationship with prescription medication in the chapter “The Terror in My Heart Says Hi.” The title of the chapter is relevant in order to analyze the rest of its content. As it is characteristic of Broder’s dark humor when depicting her problems with mental illness, the “terror” that she locates in her heart seems to be crippling and non-identified emotions

⁷⁵ *Adderall*’s effects: <https://drugabuse.com/adderall/effects-use/>

that arise from her most vulnerable parts of her-self in the form of “fear.” Many of Broder’s poems



MELISSA BRODER INSIDE A COFFIN FOR *SO SAD* TODAY’S TRAILER

have made references to this unnamed “fear,” but if one pays more attention to the most recurrent topics of her poems, one realizes the importance of death as a relevant presence that haunts her poetic production, as well as a constant obsession at her *Twitter* account *So Sad Today* and her personal one.

Even for promoting her book of personal essay *So Sad Today*, she made a promotional trailer⁷⁶ parodying her anxiety about death by putting herself inside a coffin while narrating the experience.

In the chapter mentioned before, she narrates her personal experiences consuming different types of prescription drugs in order to treat her clinical depression. In Broder’s case, there are the various types of drugs which are mentioned: *Wellbutrin*, *Effexor XR*, and *Prozac*, (Broder 2016a, 134) which are anti-depressants, whereas *Ativan*, *Xanax*, *Valium*, are different types of benzodiazepines used for treating anxiety (Broder 2016a, 134) She also mentions the consumption of *opiates*, which are drugs derived from opium used for pain relief. She explicitly describes how medication is not the solution for her problems, but at least that is better than nothing, as it is shown in: “Nothing can take away your peculiar fears and twits.” (Broder 2016a, 134) She describes extensively how she needs to alternate the medication in order to treat a complex chart of mental disorders: from depression, suicidal moods, anxiety to panic attacks; all of them narrated with the most neutral tone in the first part of the chapter. Later on, it is introduced, in the form of a diary-entry, the story of how she tried to quit *Effexor*, which she describes as the “fucking dinosaur of antidepressants” (Broder 2016a, 134), and after describes the effects of it as: “I feel like I’m overmedicated, but none of the right parts of me are medicated. I feel like I’m tweaking.” (Broder 2016a, 138) A possible interpretation of these lines is that drugs are used in order to repair the weak self for continuing fragmenting itself, as Klein described in relation to the paranoid-schizoid position.

In her last published poetry book *Last Sext* (2016), the Freudian pulsion of life and death are well embodied in a series of poems which revolved around obsessive symbolic imagery which

⁷⁶ Melissa Broder’s Book trailer for *So Sad Today* (2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dh3lr0urx9s>

includes holes, graves, violent sex and the mind's collapse or disintegration. The poem "Last Terror"⁷⁷ (Broder 2016b, 80) navigates through "abyss(es)", "infinite carves," "everywhere of graves" as the mental (land)scape for a lonely "orphan of a mind" (Broder 2016b, 80), without any particular direction. At the second part of the poem, there is the presence of an interlocutor, "my darling piggie," (Broder 2016b, 80) with whom the poetic voice longs for companionship. In this part, the poetic voice describes a process of integration of the external loved-object without splitting it into good or bad, as it shows the line: "I will find you a home and forgive you in your slops." (Broder 2016b, 80) This is even more evident as when she states that she will accept the attacks of "darling piggie" in the form of cannibalism: "even as you eat my head and hair and heart" (Broder 2016b, 80) This can be interpreted as a longing to be introjected rather than introjecting, of becoming an external loved-object and expect to be introjected, consumed, by the external object, which is a reversal of Klein's statement. This seems to be a projection for a desired disintegration of the self in order to be transformed as integrated into a different new one self: this paradoxically counters Broder's constant dread towards death as well as an obsessive fascination for it.

In an article for *The Guardian*, Broder stated that once in a therapy session, she was trying to talk about her "existential terror": "All I could hear were my own thoughts: my therapist cannot change the fact that I'm going to die. She can't even change the fact that she is going to die. Compared with death, my therapist is just a crappy pound-shop hairbrush." (Broder 6th May 2018, *The Guardian*) This seems to be connected to a passage from Broder's book *So Sad Today* that follows like this: "Two years ago my psychiatrist raised the dosage when I was finding metaphoric bats living in my chest." (Broder 2016a, 136) As in Gonzalez's poetry, prescription drugs are used to fill that terrific void of existentialism. But this terror does not disappear but instead becomes intensified in the form of "metaphoric bats." This is an animal that has been traditionally a symbol of death and rebirth because this animal usually lives inside caves, the *grotto*, and brings to the mind Russo's view on the "cavernous anatomical body" that connects with archetypes such as the "earth mother, the crone, the witch, and the vampire" (Russo 1995, 1), These grotesque female figures are closely connected to the animalistic representation of the bat as well. Hence, Broder connects this feeling about death not as a negative thing, but rather as an intimate moment of self-awareness embodied in the feeling of a "great loneliness" as well as a collective experience that nobody can avoid: "My death was mine, and mine alone. There remained a whole layer of my being that no one, not even my therapist, could touch." (Broder 6th May 2018, *The Guardian*) This idea

⁷⁷ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 305](#).

seems to comfort Broder herself as she confesses too on her article.

One can establish a parallelism between Broder's "existential terror" with the uncanny presence of anthropomorphic "bats" in Sara Jean Alexander's "The Edge-Parts of Different Places"⁷⁸ (2015, 2), which can be found in *Wildlives*. The poem starts off in a Kleinian mode, which has multiple lines of interpretations. At the first stanza, there is a very visual metaphor on human relationships, represented through bodily images that suggest different kind of layers that conditions human interaction. Through the metaphor of pregnancy, Alexander establishes a parallelism between love and sex, as it stated in the first line: "It is hard for one human to fit inside another human" (Alexander 2015, 2). The period of gestation of a baby human is implied in a monthly reference, that seems to confirm Alexander's obsessive fixation with the passing of time, like it happens in the poem 'minute lengthening of a day', previously analyzed in this chapter: "because each month that passes/ is another month removed/ and if he is three months and she is three months/then together they half a year" (Alexander 2015, 2) It is common knowledge that only through the sexual union or the gestation of a baby are the two only possible scenarios in which human contact trespasses the physical barriers of the bodies and fuse into a single entity in spatial terms.

As we have seen, it is at the early stages of the ego's development when the child still believes her and her mother-loved-object are the same entity through the bonding produced at the oral stage by breast feeding, according to Klein's explanation of the process of introjection in *A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States* (Klein 1975, 291) This can be related to the depiction of fetal imagery in the next line: "then together they are half a year of shrunken sizes and bloated minds" (Alexander 2015, 2). From a physiological point of view, fetuses have small bodies and big heads, but we can also read this image as a metaphor that stands for how while our minds get bigger and expand throughout the years, the body starts to decay, "because each lone month that passes is another month removed" (Alexander 2015, 2). Like parasites inside a foreign body, one can perceive how this veiled toxic relationship is wanted by the speaker, the pushing desire of unrequited love described as "him and her and all of the tiny men and women, a hundred thousand bodies not compatible" (Alexander 2015, 2) It is as if the amount of emotional involvement is not determined by the lack of sexual compatibility and so forth, even suggesting a lack of mutual understanding at the physical and emotional level.

⁷⁸ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 295](#).

At the second part of the poem, the bats make their appearance: “She says, I made my arms out of bats” contrasts with “He says, I made my arms the perfect length.” (Alexander 2015, 2) This opposition of physical features can be linked to the fact that, traditionally speaking, men embodies the classical bodily measures of perfection, suggested at the Da Vinci’s famous *Vitruvian Man* because of “my arms are the perfect length”, compared to the arms made out “of bats” that the woman claims to have instead. Bats are characterized by being highly sensitive to their surroundings, and often associated to intuition, vision and dreams by the exploring the underworlds of reality and the subconscious. Also, “bats” can be interpreted as a metaphor that stands for being in touch with our inner demons and conflicts. For Alexander, it seems also to stand as a symbol for being true to one self despite possibly facing alienation and confronting her own fears, but rewarded with freedom. This it is suggested in the following line, strongly connected to the other image of bats’ wings and its ability to fly, especially at night, which is another symbol strongly connected to femininity: “all of the tiny black wings began to flap. Wings. wings. wings.” (Alexander 2015, 2) This hypnotic vision leads to visualize a woman made out of “bats”, “wings” and “black”, which reinforces all these associations of the female as a grotesque figure, linked to the darkness and the nocturnal. This line also reminds of



NATASHA KHAN IN *WHAT'S A GIRL TO DO?* VIDEOCLIP.

the lyrics from Bat For Lashes’ song *What’s a Girl to Do?*⁷⁹ (2006): “And my bat lightning heart/ Wants to fly away.” The song of the British artist also speaks about unrequited love and the need to be released from any emotional attachment to the past, and the official videoclip, produced in a single shot, shows Natasha Khan, the vocalist, as riding her bike in the middle of the night surrounded by animal-masked bikers.

In this sense, we can interpret that these processes of compulsive drug ingestion shown in both Gonzalez and Border, and in Alexander’s and Carrete’s case of food ingestion, are symptoms of paranoia, which is also related to anxiety due to the absorption of “dangerous substances destructive to one’s inside” (Klein 1998, 272). According to Klein, paranoia precedes the depressive

⁷⁹ Bat For Lashes’s *What’s a Girl to Do?* (2006) videoclip: <https://vimeo.com/202203272>

state, since “anxiety” originates from “[...] endangering the internal good object by introducing bad substances from outside into it.” (Klein 1998, 272) In Gonzalez’s poem in “public places you sit or stand quietly,” (2013, 80) the incorporation of these drugs can be identified with the incorporation of “dangerous substances,” which can be potentially “destructive” if they are consumed in huge quantities or throughout long periods of time. The issue in this case would be to problematize the fact of whether these drugs, which are prescription drugs used for treating anxiety and other disorders, can be considered as either “good” or “bad” external objects, which are incorporated by the speaker in order to “endanger” or “substitute” her “good” or “bad” internal objects. These internal objects are related to her behavioral or personality traits, which also are considered by the poetic voice as negative traits for socially adjusting herself to other’s people expectations about her, according to her own account about these external expectations, as it is stated in the line “to project appealing qualities onto you.” (Gonzalez 2013, 80) These projections of the “internal objects,” which are fundamentally mental and emotional images of “external objects,” are internalized inside the self. The introjection of these “appealing qualities” can potentially produce in the speaker equally pleasure and pain, considering that the voice’s terms of “positive” and “negative” can be understood by employing Klein’s description of the notions of “good” and “bad” objects.

This also means that there is no objective consensus in discussing whether these external and internal objects are objectively either “good” or “bad,” but we can only take into account the poetic voice’s perception on what those “appealing qualities” are in relation to the drug ingestion: in the case of *benzodiazepines*, “feel(ing) detached, affectionate,” (Gonzalez 2013, 80) and in the case of *amphetamines*, “feel(ing) thinner, more sociable.” (Gonzalez 2013, 80) Apparently, these socially-related personality traits cannot be found inside her in a natural manner, so following this trail of thought, it is important to point out that by ingesting these drugs is an attempt for incorporating these “appealing qualities.” Furthermore, this can be associated to the “state of disintegration” or “dissolution” of the “loved object,” (Klein 1998, 272) which, in this case, concerns the need to belong socially. This need is being “idealized” by the poetic speaker through a process of “sublimation,” which is related to these expectations that surround the idea of “happiness” as a cultural construct imposed as a necessity for the achievement of social acceptance. Hence, anxiety arises from being unable to totally incorporate those desired “appealing qualities” as internal objects for a prolonged time, which reinforces the need to ingest the drugs in a recurrent manner in order to substitute this constant need for social validation.

The relation between drug consumption with the achievement of determined states, or

“appealing qualities,” can be also found in more recent psychoanalytic studies, which are mostly based on Klein’s account of object-relations theory. In *The Shadow of the Object* (Bollas 1987), Bollas describes that the “search for transformation” in narcissism and paranoia can be understood as “an internal recognition of the need for ego repair” or “health.” (Bollas 1987, 22) This search is achieved through the form of the “transformational object,” through the person’s projecting on her “certainty that the object will deliver transformation” (Bollas 1987, 27) she might expect from. In this sense, the “transformational objects” in Gonzalez’s poem are the *benzodiazepines* and the *amphetamines* the poetic voice takes in order to transform herself into someone else: this “someone else” is expressed through the use of the pronoun “you” as an allusion to the “Other,” which is herself but she is unable to identify with. In the report *Drug Use in Adolescents- Psychodynamic Meaning and Pharmacogenic Effect*, Wieder and Kaplan employs psychoanalytical terminology and theory in order to provide a psychoanalytic explanation for drug consumption among adolescents and young adults, describing addiction as “the wish for instant, magic chemical influence on the brain or body,” (Wieder & Kaplan 1969, 401) which clearly connects to Gonzalez’s allusions of drug consumption in her poem:

Infantile sensations of relief and distress in the feeding situation coalesce as an image of helping and hurting, loving and poisoning, magically endowed experience. Representations of “good” and “bad” objects evolve from oral ambivalence directed at food and objects. The earliest prototypes of “druglike” experiences probably are of milk, breast, and mother. In the argot of the addiction, his supplier is often called “mother” and his supplies “mood food.” Transitional objects, through their magical relief-giving qualities, also contribute to the concept of “drug,” and so do the various attempts made by parents to alleviate pain and discomfort brought on by illness. (Wieder & Kaplan 1969, 401)

Furthermore, we can suggest that it seems that the poetic voice attempts to fill a gap by incorporating those desirable behavioral traits or experiences, which otherwise she would find impossible to either perform or experience by herself. This is confirmed by a psychoanalytic interpretation done by Leon Wurmser on drug abuse in the 1970s where he claims that drugs are used as a “defense against intolerable internal factors – and, more specifically, affects” (Wurmser 1974, 830): “[...] these feelings of rage, shame and hurt were reduced as soon as they were on methadone; [...] Some of the patient said the drug made them feel normal and relaxed – implying that they felt those pervasive feeling states to be abnormal, sick, intolerable.” (Wurmser 1974, 832) We can also understand this need to fill this gap in terms of the loss and love for the “good” object, which is later represented at the last lines of the Gonzalez’s poem: when the poetic voice moves her

object-relation, from the prescription drugs she takes in order to alter her behavior, towards the subject-relation she establish with manipulative people and those “who, ..., will cause you to recall certain, specific, crippling emotions.” (Gonzalez 2013, 80) The problem that is presented in these lines is the one in which the subject, in the case of the poetic voice in Gonzalez’s poem, not only has to confront herself, but the “other who is me” according to Lacan (1993, 40), as it shown not only in the way she did with the drugs she took in order to alter her behavior in a determined manner, but to confront the existence of Other(s), those who represent what “it’s not known,” (Lacan 1993, 40) continuing this way the analysis of the poem by employing Lacanian terminology.

If for Klein unhappiness, that is related to the “depressive and manic positions” was the common or normal state of human of being in the world (Klein 1975, 279), and was productive in order to have a normal psychic development, why do we emphasize and even pathologize dissatisfaction as deviancy? Where does this obsession for the idealization of “happiness” comes from? To what extent materialistic consumption and surplus in our ordinary lives conform this neo-liberal ideal of “happiness”? How does this materialistic surplus, socially and culturally encouraged, imply an individual emotional deprivation or a lack for developing a healthy inner emotional world? Is this opposed to the emotional exteriority the pursuit of “happiness” conveys? If we take into account Ahmed’s statement about the relativity of “self-reporting” (2010, 195) as a method to measure and to evaluate happiness, I would like to propose the next set of questions: how can we interpret these poem’s conceptualization of sadness and happiness as two conflicting states of mind that the individual is unable to put words into? To what extent can we trust the pharmaco-politics of “happiness” if the ways in which we understand happiness are to be found at the level of the subjective, instead of a consensual experience? Are we really able to identify happiness as a collective ideal in order to better understand the workings of the individual and the social mind?

Therefore, I consider that the topic that mainly concerns these poems is the individual’s inability to distinguish what they are actually feeling and the way to process those set of contradictory emotions. The poetic voices analyzed in this chapter show also a tendency to avoid and to provide to these experiences a logic, so instead they take these experiences as a way to experiment with the possibilities of the resulting emotions, even if that would imply to ingest unhealthy food or to use prescriptions drugs for such purposes. The Millennial nihilism displayed by these particular poets exposes the contradictions between compulsive happiness and emotional deprivation of genuine feelings and emotions, which tends to lead to the development of a sense of

dissatisfaction, and depressive and paranoiac states. In order to conclude, I would like to point out that the major topic that these poems deal with is the way in which deviancy from the norm, in terms of behavior, is presented as a contrast to how the speakers of the poems long for what they are unable to achieve, which could be interpreted as a wish for “happiness” or normality. Instead, I argue that the poetic voices have internalized their nonconformity or depressive attitude as a counter-position to the imposition of “happiness.” Therefore, these poems attempt to normalize their “unhappy” ways of being to the extent of experimenting with the experience of having “happy” or euphoric states of mind through food ingestion and drug consumption.

Chapter 4. Inf0rm@tic\$ & D0mi(m)atriX: I[y]es + intimac(ies) 3xposs3d

A place is a story, and stories are geography, and empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a storyteller's art, and then a way of traveling from here to there.

(Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* 2013, 10)

The globe is on our computers. No one lives there. [...] the planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Planetary Loves* 2003, 72)

Modern megacities are shaping and conforming what we understand as art nowadays. In the case of *Alt [C]Lit* poets, whether it is New York City or Los Angeles, the US urban landscape has a great influence on how these young authors have configured their poetic production. Their experiences and referents belong to these cities, which have also conditioned the contemporary human general state as well. As we have seen in the previous chapter, loneliness has become the epitome of human contemporary condition. I have previously made the distinction between solitude and loneliness, tracing back in history the socio-cultural conditions that have defined both states, and how this has had an impact on the psychological and emotional side of human expression through art and literature.

In the first section of this chapter, I would like to start from how spaces, departing from the urban one, have influenced this physical isolation and made a transition into a mental landscape to which the virtual contributes to increase this anxious alienation that manifests itself through a dematerialized and virtualized body and the configuration of our online subjectivities.

In the second part, I will focus more on how the relationship with one's body and our virtual subjectification manifests its angst through sexual gratification: the way female masturbation and its emotional effects are portrayed through poems. I would put a special focus on sexual performativity through online platforms or by means of its use as a consumable media employed for instant gratification by young women nowadays.

Hence, in this chapter, I will analyze the hypermodern identit(ies) that results from the urban landscape of megalopolises, the manner in which the virtual has originated online communities and has shaped our (hyper)sexuality, and how the Zafra's concept of *netianas* can be applied in order to analyze the paradoxical position of girlhood through the *Alt [C]Lit* poetry and other related-literary and visual productions.

4.1. 'I'm not a girl, not yet a woman': C0nfigur-ing [Yvng]-VVomanhood

If aggression was not chromatic and acoustic, we would not notice that it is a place for recreation by watching people sitting, each one in front of their small window display as a working place, the eyes fixed in the sparkle of the dazzling mechanism, manoeuvring the button with a robotic gesture.

Italo Calvino – *The Flippers of Loneliness* (2013, 207)

I am alone in my room, between two worlds

Sylvia Plath, *The Unbridged Journals* (2000, 29)

As I have analyzed in the previous chapter, loneliness has become a chronic condition which most of us has to deal with throughout a great part of our daily lives. The consequences of this condition have generated a series of effects on our emotional states, as the poems of Alexander, Bess, Carrete, Broder and Gonzalez have portrayed with an apparent simplicity and boldness. Nevertheless, I have already hinted towards some possible causes very briefly, I would like to expand on them in depth in this section, such as the influence of the city's architectonical features and the use of social media on the configuration of hypermodern subjectivities, particularly the young women's ones. Therefore, I would like to start off with an extract from Italo Calvino's *The Flippers of Loneliness* in order to start a discussion on the limits of post-modern identities and the body inside the virtual:

Here there is the impression that loneliness is a mass, no one seems to know anyone, each one is focused on their game, staring at their shinning labyrinth and ignoring the person next to his right as well as the one on the left, each one like locked in their invisible cell, isolated in their obsession or sentence. (Calvino 2013, 207-208)



PEOPLE PLAYING PACHINKO IN JAPAN.

The emotional and mental confinement that Calvino describes Japanese society during the 1970s is familiar to the present situation of the rest of the world, especially in Western societies. Calvino's fascination with Japanese's application of technology to ludic activities such as the *pachinko* and how public transport constrains social and working life in big cities such as Tokyo can be perceived as a premonition on what was to come 40 years after in the rest of the world. It feels as if the Japanese were the pioneers of the virtual and their contribution to the rest of the world was importing ludic technology. The automatization of recreational activities with the mediation of machines and other devices is compared to a process that needs the use of one's energy as if one was only focused on working on a difficult task that requires her absolute attention and isolates her from her immediate reality. The lonely Japanese multitude that Calvino describes seems to resonate to how people isolate themselves on their smartphones in practically anywhere there is some Internet connection available all around the world.

From April till September 2019, the Palacio de Velázquez held an exhibition on Japanese artist Tetsuya Ishida under the title of *Self-Portrait of the Other*⁸⁰, curated by Reina Sofía Museum, in Madrid. When one approaches Ishida's work, it feels as if his paintings project an unsettling feeling towards the audience about the human condition in contemporary times. Ishida's paintings are a pessimistic portrait of Japanese society during the late 1990s and the early 2000s, but their impact as a critique of precariousness and consumption is even made more evident nowadays: as a kind of premonition of what the rest of the world, in particular the West, was about to confront the technological dominance and its influence in our daily lives. Belonging to the so-called lost generation in Japan, his striking work resonates to many people nowadays, like a visionary who had already witnessed the future, way ahead of his own time: one of his works shows a young man whose mobile phone has been crushed upon his bloody face; another turning his face towards the audience as if he was hiding something



CONQUERED BY TETSUYA ISHIDA (2004)

shameful behind his computer screen; a robotic man connected to his mobile phones while carrying on his shoulders another man working on his laptop; a multiple version of the same man eating junk food, alone in his room, wearing a plastic shopping bag, alone, surrounded by his chaotic mess;

⁸⁰ Tetsuya Ishida's *Self Portrait of the Other* (2019): <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/exposiciones/tetsuya-ishida>

rubbish, books, tissues and other technological devices. These images present the everyday nature of one's relationship with the self, either mediated by technology or as isolated in one's room: the conflicting and paradoxical position of the virtual in one's current existence. In Ishida's work, it seems evident that virtual connectivity disconnects us, and isolates us even more, from reality and from others. The body is affected by this by being damaged, mutilated and even morphed into half-hybrids with insects and inanimate objects. Ishida's agonic world of *hikikomoris* has been compared to Kafkaian fantasies of contemporary human decadence.

As we have witnessed, humanity is going through an extended existential crisis. The hypermodern individual, as Ishida's sinister characters, has internalized the naturalization of precariousness and consumption in every aspect of our daily lives, submitting to the dominion of technology, becoming subordinates to the constant productivity of every aspect of our lives, which makes no time to leisure and disconnection from the performance of activities, blurring the boundaries between work and consumption that affects our exhausted bodies and anxious minds. According to French sociologist and anthropologist David Le Breton, the imposition of freedom and autonomy upon the individual forces her into adopting an attitude of self-sufficiency to which she is not really prepared to. In this sense, life becomes a harder task itself that the individual is unable to bear or confront, hence she has the urge of freeing herself from the exigencies of a reality that does not offer any support or reward in exchange. Le Breton argues that these exigencies are more focused on the adaptation of the individual to "the flexibility, the urgency, the speed, the competitiveness, the efficiency, and so on" (Le Breton 2016, 6?)⁸¹ of the circumstances that surrounds her rather than on the personal growth or development of the individual.

The endless of possibilities available demotivates and paralyses the individual who is unable to decide, overwhelmed by having no guidance or direction in what or not to choose. Also, the lack of stability of each individual's situation is aggravated by a series of socio-economic circumstances that put one's ability to change and adapt into a constant threat and danger and which do not allow him to establish strong and deep connections with others: "The hypermodern individual is disconnected. (S)he demands the presence of others, but also their distance." (Le Breton 2016, 6?) There is a need, even an urge, for disconnection in the hyper-connected society we live in nowadays. As Ishida's work represents, it seems that our current lives delve around the constant performativity and productivity in every aspect of our existence: that means that work, consumption and free time have become undistinguishable realms as the products of an uninterrupted flow of

⁸¹ My translation.

activity. There is no doubt that authors such as Le Breton and Byung Chul Han speak about the *burnout syndrome* for describing the current mood that de-humanizes the individual in order to turn her into an exhausted and de-motivated machine too tired to fight or rebel against her current condition. According to Han, the individual gets tired of constantly fighting against the imposition of an “obligated freedom” or “free obligation” that forces her to “maximize her performance.” (Han 2010, ¿?) For Le Breton, the duty for productivity leads the individual towards a state of *blankness*, that is an “non-occupied space, the emptiness” (Le Breton 2016, ¿?) that puts her into a temporal pause in her current existence, lingering in a “limbo” that is “neither totally inside nor totally outside” (Le Breton 2016, ¿?) of any current social relationship or connection to any particular reality. Han agrees on this respect with Le Breton: the external pressure to excel oneself creates a sense of distrust about the external world and leads the individual to look for a refuge inside oneself, that results into the “drilling and the emptying of the self.” (Han 2010, ¿?) Hence, the virtual becomes a psychological, and even emotional, shelter for those who are too tired of living in a hostile and demanding real world. How has the city become a place of loneliness and bodily alienation? Is the virtual the next the promised land for the tired and exhausted hopeless generation?

4.1.1. Urban Deca-dence: dissociat(ing) from the [Mega]+ polis

If for Calvino, the junkies of loneliness were the Japanese people playing *pachinko*, nowadays the junkies of loneliness seem to be absorbed groups of Millennials compulsively checking their social media through computers or smartphones, anytime, anywhere. In *The Lonely City*, Olivia Laing makes an interesting analysis of the history of loneliness in New York by exploring the lives of some the most famous 20th-century artists who lived and worked there. Mainly through the art of Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, Henry Darger and David Wojnarowicz, Laing reflects on how big cities have influenced the way these artists have employed art in order to explore and to express their alienation from society:

Cities can be lonely places, and in admitting this we see that loneliness doesn't necessarily require physical solitude, but rather an absence or paucity of connection, closeness, kinship: an inability, for one reason or another, to find as much intimacy as is desired. *Unhappy*, as the dictionary has it, *as a result of being without the companionship of others*. Hardly any wonder, then, that it can reach its apotheosis in a crowd. (Laing 2016, 4)

As a form of disconnection, the modern architecture that configures big megapolis like New York, loneliness has become a state of being rather than an option, as I have already commented on

the previous chapter. Laing makes an interesting commentary on this issue by analyzing Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942): the painting shows a group of people isolated inside a diner at night, seen from the point of view of a pedestrian walking by the street. Laing describes the diner as "an urban aquarium, a glass cell" (Leing 2016, 21), as if the characters from the painting were trapped inside the glass structure of the diner, that shows no exit to the exterior. Also, it is interesting to notice that



NIGHTHAWKS BY EDWARD HOPPER (1942)

there is little, if not any, interaction between the characters depicted in Hopper's scene. This is the kind of urban landscape in which you can visualize Alexander, Bess, Carrete, Gonzalez or Broder, working on their writing in any crowded café in Manhattan, alone in their virtual bubbles, disconnected and absorbed in an online dimension. It is not hard to imagine these *Alt [C]Lit* poets hiding their faces behind the shining screen, self-centered composing or browsing the web as if reality did not exist.

In *Flesh and Stone*, Richard Sennett explores the evolution of urban spaces since Ancient Greek into our most modern megapolis, specifically New York. In his analysis, he focuses on the interaction between bodies and spaces. In particular, he focuses on how the mobility of the body is connected to the dissociation of the individual from her surroundings:

The physical condition of the travelling body reinforces this sense of disconnection from space. Sheer velocity makes it hard to focus one's attention on the passing scene. [...] Thus the new geography reinforces the world in narcotic terms; the body moves passively, desensitized in space, to destinations set in a fragmented and discontinuous urban geography. (Sennett 1996, 18)

In this sense, Augé's concept of non-places can be useful for the analysis of urban spaces as places for transit-movement: by using Certeau's concept of space as a "frequented place, an intersection of moving bodies", Augé argues that "it is the pedestrians who transform a street (geometrically defines as a place by town planners) into a space." (Augé 1996, 79) It seems that both Sennett and Augé apply Certeau's theory of the body and the space in order to explain the interactions between individuals and places through the materialization of corporeal movements that is produced in a place. But in Sennett's case, instead of producing a deeper connection between urbanites and urban spaces, the travelling experience, or the experience of commuting in urban areas, results into the dis-connection and fragmentation that leaves the body numb, unable to feel

what is happening around her. It is as if the mind potentially disengages from the tedious and repetitive process of spatial movement that becomes a transition displacement from one location to another. Nowadays, it seems evident that being and not being is connected to this idea of commuting as a moment for disengaging from one's own body, while putting one's mind in the next thing one plans to do, as it is the case of Gabby Bess in her poem 'BAD BITCH' from *Alone With Other People* (2013):

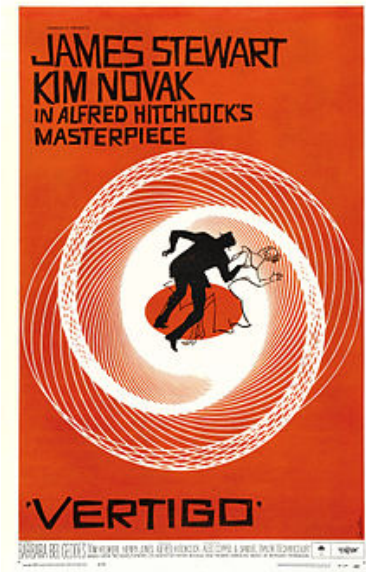
We mapped out every conceivable route through the
subways of New York
in our search to find Jay Z to show him our poetry (Bess 2013, 189)

As it is evident, the goal of Bess is not "mapp(ing) out every conceivable route through the subways of New York" (Bess 2013, 189) as a way of exploring the underground tunnels of the city, but it becomes rather the means through which to achieve meeting her idol, Jay Z, and to validate her poems. Transportation is not about enjoying the ride, but rather the medium through which to get one to the finish line, paradoxically not moving but getting one's body to a different place. The subway as a means of space makes the individual disengaging temporarily from her immediate medium, becoming a passive body from where the mind dissociates through daydreaming or thinking about something else. This view is supported by Augé, who identifies the means of human transportation in big cities as "non-places" as "installations needed for the accelerated circulation of passengers and goods" (Augé 1996, 34): this is what he has denominated as "spatial overabundance", one of the three figures of excess that Augé identifies as characteristic of "supermodernity" (Augé 1996, 40-41). In Ana Carrete's "Cute taxi driver"⁸² from *make-believe love-making* (2012), the car and the taxi become two different spaces where abandonment and attraction take place through the absence or presence of transiting from one place to another: the absence of an ex-partner is symbolized in the line "your car wasn't there anymore" and the sense of abandonment is reinforced in "you left without me" (Carrete 2012, 16). In the next stanza, the voice of the poem's coping with this overwhelming emotion is expressed in "I vomited on the sidewalk" and her hesitation about having a breakup closure, "I texted goodbye" (Carrete 2012, 16). Then, she immediately forgets about it, "but saved it as draft," after finding out there life goes on and new opportunities arises in front her, as in "the taxi driver flirted with me/ later" (Carrete 2012, 16). The sequence that Carrete makes in the poem clearly makes a parallelism between how these 'non-places', so overlooked in our daily experiences, interestingly mark emotional attachment and

⁸² The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 312](#).

condition our emotional states without being noticed: these spaces of transition project one's inner landscape as urbanely-conditioned individuals.

The experience as dissociating one's own body from their surroundings is described in a metaphoric manner by Melissa Broder's "Vertigo"⁸³ from *Meat Heart* (2012, 70-71). The title seems an explicit allusion to Hitchcock's psychological thriller from 1958, in which the protagonist develops a fear of heights that causes him to suffer from vertigo. It is interesting to note that the vertigo effect mainly consists on experiencing a false sense of rotational movement, in which the body is still, but there is a feeling of how objects spin around one's position. There is another reference to another of Hitchcock's films, *Psycho* (1960), in the line, where the voice of the poem fantasizes about being the protagonist of the famous scene in such movie: "See yourself scream in a shower scene." (Broder 2012, 70) Both references clearly point out to how the body totally disengages from its position in reality by means of experiencing dissociating states, such as the vertigo effect and seeing oneself projected into a particular famous movie scene. In this poem, Broder explores the boundaries between the dream-day fantasy and the urban spaces, in this



VERTIGO BY ALFRED HITCHCOCK (1958)



PSYCHO BY ALFRED HITCHCOCK (1960)

case, those one belonging to Los Angeles, *the city of broken dreams*: where artists go to (un)fulfill their projects, their careers, their prospects in a successful and wealthy life. It is representing as a never-ending chasing game, that cyclically repeats in motions like the movement of cars in a roundabout: "One minute Hollywood Boulevard/ is a rotating field." (Broder 2012, 70) It is interesting to note that 'Hollywood

Boulevard' is a straight long street that starts in Sunset Boulevard and finishes in Laurel Canyon Boulevard, where it becomes a residential area. This boulevard is famous for being the placement of the 'Hollywood Walk of Fame', to which Broder refers in the poem as: "*And where there was only sidewalk / Appears a constellation of stars.*" (Broder 2012, 70) Hence, it is not strange that the poet makes constant allusions to the Hollywood landscape as a place where all these old dreams haunt

⁸³ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, 306](#).

you in the form of a ghost, a disembodied form of existence that wonders between two co-existing realities: one in which the decadence of existing pushes people towards frustration and mental breakdowns, and another one, in which others linger as if expecting a better future prospect, as it happens to *Mulholland Drive*⁸⁴'s protagonist and aspiring actress Betty Elms. Broder's dreamy vision of how these two realities cohabit and melt into one from time to time reminds of David Lynch's sinister



MULHOLLAND DRIVE BY DAVID LYNCH (2001)

movie, in which things are not really what they look like. This is perfectly illustrated at the beginning of Lynch's movie, in a sequence where Betty is seen fantasizing about her future career in Hollywood while her shining figure mixes with napalm skies and the palm trees at Los Angeles sidewalks like a ghost. This scene is somehow reminiscence of Broder's next stanzas from "Vertigo":

Watch your bracelets dissolve like tablets.
The Hollywood sign tumbles in your soup
And you gobble up the alphabet.

You are the breeze rolling down Topanga.

At sunset watch the ghost go poof
But you are him too. Watch grass glow. (Broder 2012, 71)

As in Lynch's movie, Broder plays with the psychological turmoil behind fantasies collapsing with a reality which is more like a surrealist living nightmare. The collapse of the mind is portrayed in the poem as how the chains of the body literally disappears in front of the voice of the poem's mind ("watch your bracelets dissolve like tablets") and how the landscape also disappears by being transformed into something else ("The Hollywood sign tumble in your soup") as if it was another fantasy to be feed by ("and you goggle up the alphabet") (Broder 2012, 71). The voice of the poem completely leaves the material body in order to join the landscape by becoming "the breeze rolling down Topanga" (Broder 2012, 71). What is interesting to note is how the material body passes from being in an urban context and dematerializes to join a 'greener' one, one that is more connected to nature and wilderness. It seems like Broder depicts this need to leave one's body in order to feel freer, as it is suggested in the closing lines: "At sunset watch the ghost go poof / But

⁸⁴ David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) official trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbZJ487oJIY>

you are him too. Watch grass glow.” (Broder 2012, 71) Many researchers have tried to explain this need of the urbanite for leaving the city in order to de-toxify oneself: it has been denominated as “urban toxicity.” (Shorter, 2017, 19) The closeness of people living together in reduced spaces compared to how people used to live back in time, has suggested that urbanites live with other people but not necessarily together. In this sense of detachment from each other that seems to likely happen in big cities, Augé points out that there seems to be a capitalist, or at least consumerist, purpose in the way social life has been crafted in the architecture of the big cities, that align up to what he calls the “modern technologies for desensitizing the human body”:

Once a mass of bodies packed tightly together in the centers of cities, the crowd today has dispersed. It is assembled in malls for consumption rather than for the more complex purposes of community or political power; in the modern crowd the physical presence of other human beings feels threatening. (Augé 1996, 21)

What Augé tries to explain is that in big cities, people barely know each other, there is constant exposition of the body to alien presences and sounds belonging to the rush of city lifestyle: “Thus, the former “excitement of urban life seemed to have turned into the “stress” of urban life.” (Shorter 2017, 20) Another interesting example of urban life and its paradoxes can be found in Mira Gonzalez’s poem “symbolic interactionism”⁸⁵:

people walk from one destination to another
with looks of determination on their faces
they stare at me
and they say ‘where the fuck are you going’
I say ‘I am going to a place’
they say ‘fuck you’
and I have an intense feeling of being a pathetic asshole
and that feeling manifests itself in the form of frantic unrestrained
movement (Gonzalez 2013, 7)

In the first stanza of this poem, one can see how moving through the city becomes form of communication and form of expression of our inner selves without us noticing it, as the poetic voice reflects on the previous lines. To begin with, there is a clear contrast between the voice of the poem’s movements with the ones of the other people around her: “People walk from one destination to another/ with looks of determination on their faces” and “and I have an intense feeling of being a pathetic asshole / and that feeling manifests itself in the form of frantic unrestrained / movement” (Gonzalez 2013, 7) The “determination” of going “from one destination to another”

⁸⁵ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 321](#).

puts up “the form of frantic unrestrained / movement”, seems connected to what Merleau-Ponty had defined as the “anthropological space” in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945):

Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the position of things becomes possible. [...] Therefore, either I do not reflect, but live among things and vaguely regard space at one moment as the setting for things, at another as their common attribute – or else I do reflect: I catch space at its source, and now think the relationships which underlie this word, realizing then that they live only through the medium of a subject who traces out and sustains them; and pass from spatialized to spatializing space. (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 284)

Both ways of walking express opposing forces that configures the transit of urban life, that resembles the law of the concrete jungle: people rushing, determined, towards their destination in automatic motion, as if they were driven by a GPS inserted inside their brains, whereas the Gonzalez’s poetic voice does not know where to go. Her alienation is expressed in: “and I have an intense feeling of being a pathetic asshole” (Gonzalez 2013, 7) Even the rest of the people seems to be hostile towards her hesitation, her sense of being lost, but not just in the literal sense, but also as the total sense of not knowing what doing with your life, what is your goal and purpose in life: “destination” and “place” seems to be here key words that also means something else apart from referring to spatial notions. A “place” is just a location focused on the present without any projection onto the future, nor any particular meaning: it is not determined by a purpose or defined by a goal, the contrary of what a “destination” represents. Therefore, people’s reaction to her is a form of alienation that affects to her very notion of embodiment, as it is stated in the following lines:

I begin to realize that my face will never be inside of your face
and that we can silently communicate using a series of microscopic
gestures

and we will understand that the phrase ‘alone together’ is not an
oxymoron anymore

and I will resolve to never be happy enough to forgive you
and I promise that from now on I will only have emotions that can be
perceived as neutral (Gonzalez 2013, 7)

Gonzalez's inability to connect with random people in the street is also translated to her longing to connect with someone, the anonymous “you” whom one does really not know if it is a particular person or the idealization of a partner. The impossibility of total bodily communion is expressed through a kiss in the line “my face will never be inside of your face” (Gonzalez 2013, 7):

this anxiety is culminated in “we will understand that the phrase ‘alone together’ is not/ an oxymoron anymore” (Gonzalez 2013, 7) These feelings seem to express a paradox in itself that Sennett explains as how the city’s urban composition of buildings and crossways symbolizes people living together nowadays: “This desire to free the body from resistance is coupled with the fear of touching, a fear made evident in modern urban design.” (Sennett 1996, 18) This fear and longing for closeness is perfectly expressed in “I will only have emotions that can be/ perceived as neutral” (Gonzalez 2013, 7) The need to contain oneself in order to avoid being hurt can be extended to the constant fear people live of being physically hurt, something that is also reflected in the configuration of streets and sidewalks: as Sennett points out parallel to be touched by a stranger, to be exposed to potential harm encourages this paranoid feeling that everybody and everything is a potential threat one’s wellbeing. This seems to encourage isolating ourselves: firstly, from a physical point of view by living piled up, next to each other, in small apartments that form part of bigger building constructions; secondly, emotionally, by virtually closing ourselves in our connected rooms, as Zafra would claim, and only connecting to those ones and other things we have previously and meticulously selected, disconnecting consciously from what we do not like. This is what Lyotard draws our attention in *The Postmodern Condition* about social relations, communication and language are affected by postmodern thought:

This breaking up of the grand Narratives [...] leads to what some authors analyze in terms of the dissolution of the social bond and the disintegration of social aggregates into a mass of individual atoms thrown into the absurdity of Brownian motion. Nothing of the kind is happening: this point of view, it seems to me, is haunted by the paradisaic representation of a lost “organic” society. (Lyotard 1985, 15)

It seems that the instability of language, the ephemerality of relationship, the rapid shifting and change of circumstances make difficult for people to establish solids bonds. The mobility and complexity of these new connections between people, as Lyotard argues, is more difficult due to a displacement of the “*self*” into “nodal points” inside “specific communication circuits”, which produces an “alteration” of the messages that “traverse” the “*self*” (Lyotard 1985, 15). In this sense, these reflections seem to resonate with the sense of loneliness people must face nowadays, and which Gonzalez perfectly illustrates with words at the end of poem: “I wonder how it is possible that there are billions of people in the world/ Yet I am the only person on the planet” (Gonzalez 2013, 7) Those “billions of people in the world” represents the billions of “nodal points” in lost in multi-modal communication throughout the web that Lyotard talked about in the late 1970’s. Isolated, Gonzalez’s poetic voice perfectly expresses the urbanite’s melancholic sense of aloneness

through feeling disconnection from others and short of social emptiness, that even makes weaker, human relationships in the big cities: crowded, packed, but still separated, on one's own in the end.

4.1.2. The emergence of the Cyborg Nation: t@pped into the W3rldWideWeb



ILANA IN 'THE WORLDWIDE BLOODSTREAM' (*BROAD CITY*, 2015)

There is an interesting comic scene in American TV show *Broad City* that shows the protagonists, Abbi and Ilana, spending a whole day inside their apartment, absorbed in their computers without realizing how much time they spent in such activity. Interestingly enough, the episode is titled “The Worldwide Bloodstream” (2015)⁸⁶, and attempts to illustrate parodically how much time we use to spend in front of our computers procrastinating by surfing the web, wasting time watching and looking up for useless content information online, such browsing gossip websites, watching viral videos, searching through dating mobile apps. After a while, both come back to reality after the alarm of their phones runs off and they realized, surprised, that they are still together in the same room: in other words, they got so sucked up in the Internet that they did not remember that they were still together after such a long time, inside the darkness of their living room. After such shocking moment of awareness, Ilana exclaims: “We were so tapped into the worldwide bloodstream, we fell into the literal Matrix.” (*Broad City*, Season 2, Episode 6, 2015, 2:30-2:34) From this quote comes the inspiration for the title: the use of the word “bloodstream,” instead of the more commonly used expression “web”, suggests an anatomical-biological

⁸⁶*The Worldwide Bloodstream* scene in *Broad City* (2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-3QiG0Cmo&index=14&list=PLD7nPL1U-R5pl1nh9s1dQFy6zpTYII0r->

connection through which we navigate, sucking up our lives like vampires. The room, either living room or bedroom, has become the nexus between the virtual and reality that connects our intimacy with the projection of our existence into the digital. As Zafra claims in *A Connected Room of One's Own* (2012), the concept of 'connected room of one's own' theorizes the impact of the "screen" as the "quintessential window" through which "the room oscillates between the double dimension of *space* and *place*" (Zafra 2012, 480), reminding us of Augé's concept of 'non-places', which is commented in the previous section. But Zafra moves a step further in concluding that the 'room' is conditioning the formation of alternative and constantly-updating subjectivities outside the traditional social spectrum by creating "bonds of belonging" instead of excluding through 'social networking':

In anthropological terms, our room is a concrete place because it contains memories and it allows us to build an identity. Yet is also a place of possibility because, when connected, we create virtual routes and margins. If the route is anonymous, accidental and the product of drifting, we will be in a space, however if we identify and subjectify ourselves, thus transforming ourselves into a reference, we will be frequenting a place. (Zafra 2012, 480)

In Japan, *hikikomori* deal with their loneliness by opting out, like hermits, total social withdrawal inside their rooms for most of the time. A group of sociologists have argued that the existence of such isolated and anti-social people has been stimulated, and even increased, by the extensive options for leading a normal life alone offered by media technologies:

With the development of Internet, most shopping can be done via the net (and "net shopping" coupled with advanced delivery networks is especially advanced in Japan), making it possible to live without going out. Furthermore, even when withdrawn from society and shut in at home, it has become possible to enjoy various types of entertainment such as online games in complete isolation. Indeed, a universal world can be achieved by living alone. (Kato & at. 2017, 209)

It seems that many researchers find where to put the blame directly: the addiction to technology as a way to find some sort of comfort in order to face the emptiness of social isolation. But Japan is not the only nation which has developed this social problem due to the omnipresence of media technologies in our daily routines. According to a data report from *YouGov*⁸⁷, the sense of loneliness felt by USA Millennials rated as higher than previous generations: "[...] they have no acquaintances (25% of Millennials say this is the case), no friends (22%), no close friends (27%), and no best friends (30%)." (Ballard 30th July 2019, *Today You Gov*) According to this study, there are a series of factors that contributes to this inability for bonding with other people: "[...] shyness

⁸⁷ *YouGov* is an international research firm of data analysis on public opinion: <https://es.yougov.com/>

(53%). Another 27 percent of those who find it difficult to make friends say that they “don’t feel like they need friends.” A similar number (26%) say they don’t have any hobbies or interests that can facilitate friendships.” (Ballard 30th July 2019, *Today YouGov*) These new forms of social isolation and awkwardness were also depicted by Tetsuya Ishida in the image shown next: a young man faces the spectator, as if taken by surprise, while he covers with tree-morphing body his computer, who has attached an index finger as a mouse. There is a square hole that leads towards stairs on the surface of his desk, towards which the index finger seems to point out. This image can be associated to that of the *hikikomori*, the one that *Broad City* also brilliantly depicts: the physical disintegration of the anatomical body, virtually absorbed by a different world, that one online. It seems that young people today scape



UNTITLED BY TETSUYA ISHIDA, DATE UNKNOWN.

from the alienating hostility of big cities to look for some reassurance or relief through virtual reality and other social media. Disconnecting from the body helps to relief the pain that loneliness causes by projecting ourselves virtually, literally, disintegrating into bits. Merleau- Ponty explained in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) about how virtual subjectivities dissociate from their bodies in an attempt to regain the control that has been lost in the real world, through the simulation of self-spectacle:

The virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, [...] he inhabits the spectacle. The spatial tilts and takes up its new position. It is, then, a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body to the world. Being projected, in the absence of anchoring points, by the attitude of my body alone, [...] when my actual body is at one with the virtual body required by the spectacle, and the actual spectacle with the setting which my body throws around it. (Merleau-Ponty 2005, 291-292)

In *Anthropology of the Body and Modernity* (1990), Le Breton explains how our relation to the body has changed over the course of the last century. Since our existence is mainly corporeal, the processes of de-materialization and re-invention of the body through virtual reality and its mediums of diffusion, such as social media, are in conflict to those other movements, which mainly belong to feminist groups standing for ‘body positivity’ thinking. Post-modernity has become the battleground of what it seems to be a conflict between image, immaterial idealization, versus the

body, fleshly embodiment. According to Le Breton, the centrality of body relies on its social symbolism, that seems to tie up together at the same time that it constitutes us as individuals (Le Breton 1995, 7). The social rupture of the individual with the other collectivities, which has also led her to abandon other moral and spiritual constructs, has left her with a sense of vast emptiness that is filled with constant activity as an attempt to cope with this existential void of nothingness. This radically division between individual and the collective is manifested in the extreme reclusiveness of *hikikomoris*, but it is also become a standardized symptom of the individualism that characterizes our times: the ‘Me/Selfie culture’ has become a norm that not only affects Millennials, but it has reached other individuals across the generations that still coexist now. For Le Breton, the diagnosis is already evident but still, our culture has not responded to the needs of these radical individuals in a satisfactory way without problematizing, or even pathologizing, this disconnection among people:

As a result of the absence of a cultural response to guide one’s choices and actions, the man has abandoned himself to his own initiatives, to his loneliness, helpless facing a series of essentials events of the human condition: death, illness, loneliness, unemployment, aging, adversity ... [...] The tendency towards self-withdrawal, the search of autonomy that mobilizes many individuals does not stop having evident consequences in the cultural fabric. [...] On the contrary, personal solutions proliferate with the goal of covering the deficiency of the symbolic by taking ideas form other cultural fabrics or by means of creating new references. (Le Breton 1995, 15)

What Le Breton describes seems to be the symptoms of a condition that affects individualism in its core of self-centered narcissism and sickens it. On the other hand, these symptoms have a different source for Byung Chul Han: “the *forced freedom* or the *free obligation*” (Han 2010, 13), as he describes it in *The Burnout Society*. Han argues that “this paradoxical freedom” is a product of the obsession towards maximizing laboring and achievement, in which the constant production of activity is rewarded, and even encouraged, leading people towards exhaustion: “Totally incapable of getting out of himself, of being outside, of trusting the other and the world, he insists on himself, which leads, paradoxically, to the piercing and the emptying of the I.” (Han 2010, 42) In this sense, the body becomes more than a container where our subjectivity withdraws from, but it also turns into the departing point from which transformation takes place as a projection of our mental ideals, as Le Breton also suggests: “The body of modernity becomes a *melting pot* closer to the surrealist *collages*. Each author “builds up” a representation in which the body becomes him, individually, in an autonomous manner, [...]” (Le Breton 1995, 15) For Han, the liberation of the individual from external coercions and exigencies does not exempt her from creating new ones that originates from her inner needs: “One exercises violence against oneself and exploits himself. The violence of others is replaced by a self-generated violence, which

is more fatal than the other one, since the victim of this violence thinks himself as free.” (Han 2010, 49) This obsessive reinversion of the external self through physical corporality is a problematic Melissa Broder explores in her book *So Sad Today* (2016), as it forms part of her reflections on her addiction to the world online in chapter “I took the Internet Addiction Quiz and I won”. The following fragment from Broder’s work proves Le Breton’s and Han’s remarks on the interactions between subjectivity and the body:

Reality was never my first choice. I like that I can be somebody else on the Internet. I like that I can present one facet of myself and embody that. I don’t have to live in a body on the Internet. It’s so much easier to present an illusion of oneself than to contain multitudes. Illusion is easier than flesh. I like that other people can be a hologram version of themselves on the Internet, too. I like tweets and nudes, romantic emails, avatars and dick pics. I like that get to fill in blanks. Who are you? I’ll decide. (Broder 2016a, 76)

In this fragment, Broder expresses the appeal of the Internet for her: the transformational power of online identit(ies). She also finds it appealing that the other people who interacts with on the Internet are not real people as well. Broder seems to express her distress about reality and how, in order to cope with it, uses the Internet as a way to escape from those parts she does not like about her current existence: “The Internet has given me the dopamine, attention, amplification, connection, and escape I seek. [...] The Internet has enhanced my taste for isolation. It has increased my solipsism and made me even more incapable of coping with reality.” (Broder 2016a, 76) Broder’s fear for reality has been expressed in the poem “In want of rescue from the real”⁸⁸ from her last book of poetry *Last Sext*:

Fantasies die so dry
Still I held on
Because the real is arctic
[...]
And I am scared of death
And I am scared of life (Broder 2016b, 11)

The “fantasies” that “die so dry” from the poem refers to the “illusion” from the fragment of *So Sad Today*. The poetic voice argues that “the real is arctic” (Broder 2016b, 11): reality represents an extremely cold world despite the fact that “fantasies” are ephemeral and leaves her emptier each time (“die so dry”) (Broder 2016b, 11) It is interesting to note the synesthetic metaphors implied in which element in opposition, “fantasies” versus “the real”, as described in terms of sensations: one is “dry” while the other is “arctic”. It seems that what the voice of the poem finds relieving about fantasies is that, despite their futility, she does not have the sense of being living or dying in a real

⁸⁸ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 307](#).

sense, as it is described in the closing lines: “And I am scared of death / And I am scared of life.” (Broder 2016b, 11) As Broder claims in *So Sad Today*, the addictive power of the Internet relies on the fact that one loses contact with the real, with the materiality of corporeal sense of time and space, its infinite sense of “potential”: “There is something about the Internet that, even when it sucks, holds infinite potential all times.” (Broder 2016a, 88) As Broder claims, everything is possible in the online sphere. For Broder, the online space is a place that allows her to transcend the limitations of real corporeality, in a Cartesian fantasy that prioritizes the immaterial mind over the material body.

Hence, the Internet has become the epitome of social placebo: a fake supply of social interaction that is as volatile and flaky, uncompromised, that we are still not really certain about its future consequences, and how it is radically changing the social fabric in the long term. What was once imagination, now the Internet supplies it in a way that passivizes, and even damages, one’s creative potential to project mental images rather than being constantly exposed to the stimulation of the visual. Also, there is an infinite number of people that are available online, but it also means that due to the instable nature of online identities, these new social bonds disappear with the same speed they arise, as the poem continues to confirm in the following lines: “I made new mindfriends fast and wet / But they kept dying dry” (Broder 2016b, 11) The opposition between fluidity of creation contrasts with the dry state of disintegration. As Paula Sibilía argues in *The Post-Organic Man*, the obsolescence of the material body originates from its organic limitations, as “*impure*”, “*imperfect and defective*”, so technology and science constantly attempt to challenge this very notion by reparation, recreation and transcendence in its most literal sense (Sibilía 2005, 115-116) In a poem by Gabby Bess, the dread about mortality of the corporeal existence is expressed in “Google search history: webnd, fibromyalgia, webmd lumps in throat, webmd throat cancer, how do you know if you have throat cancer, like, for real?”⁸⁹ from *Alone With Other People* (Bess 2013, 326-331), where the poetic voice also reflects on how the passing of time affects our existence in a fatal manner:

[...] the belligerent nature of time. Four
lines in and I still have not given consent to all
this forward motion. Everything can kill me.

The abstract concept of time can kill me. Cancer will
definitely kill me. (Bess 2013, 328-329)

⁸⁹ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 298](#).

The planned obsolescence of the biological body has become the major angst of the current times due to how the widespread medical knowledge has been made available not online through traditional education, but also through the access to this type of information in a more accessible manner through the Internet. It is true that most of times this information is not as reliable as the opinion of a medical expert, but still, many people, out of curiosity, attempt to self-educate themselves about the possible ways in which their bodily symptoms are a clear sign of deadly outcomes. This morbid interest seems to be related to our sense of physical mortality, our sense of bodily limitlessness, the awareness of our material disintegration. The poetic voice expresses a sense of powerlessness about death, it is reversed by an attempt to challenge the control that our mortality has over one's existence in:

And if it is true that laptops somehow increase your
chances of getting cancer, I don't care.
I will just increase my non-specific fear of cancer
appropriately. (Bess 2013, 328- 329)

Challenging death by actively contributing to your own certainty of death is used as a strategy to cope with this dread for death: "[...] Whatever / is going to kill me will kill me / and it will be mine" (Bess 2013, 330) It feels as if owning your death, an indirect form of prolonged, long-term suicide, provides this sense of control over one's body, even its way of dying. In Bess' particular case, if she is going to die by exposing herself to cancer by means of using her laptop, it will be her choice, not her body's random choice. Also, there is a subtle idea of how new



CELL PHONE ROBOT AND LAPTOP BOY BY
TET SUYA ISHIDA (1996)

technologies are contributing to one's inevitable destruction by choice: what we enjoy will kill us in the end. This is the cyborg fantasy of how technology is going to form part of our lives, even our deaths. Like Ishida's painting of a robot-man, a hybrid conformed by his ears morphed into mobile phones while he carries on his shoulder a man dressed in white, working impassively in his computer. Therefore, the prioritization of the world that happens behind our computer screens is what Lipovetsky described in *The Global Screen* (2001) as "screenocracy", which is defined as: "[...] a flow of images that transforms the hypermodern individual into *Homo pantalicus* [...]" (Lipovetsky 2009, 270) As he argues,

Technological progresses and individual aspirations for expression have promoted the appearance of a new kind of de-centralized communication that spins around the inter-operativity and its use on the net. There is no longer an obsession of the individual for the

spectacle-screen, instead there is a will of the subjects to take over the screens and the tools of communication. (Lipovestky 2009, 273-274)

As it is evident, the communication has been de-materialized as the body has been disembodied. As keep living, as Lipovetsky describes as “glued to the screen and connected to net” (Lipovestky 2009, 271), the body is left behind as a carcass that merely contains this highly virtualized subjectivity, a mind that is sucked in the addictive tentacle-like-threads of the online world wide web. Sibilia speaks about the *post-organic man* as the new humanistic ideal to transcend, this fleshly prison-(cell), as Socrates once claimed in Plato’s *Phaedo*, that the body has become to the hypermodern man nowadays. Finally, the soul, that is our subjectivity, has found a way to get rid of, at least momentarily, of the burden of their corporeal existence: by means of the virtual. This is what Sibilia argues in the following extract:

As it happens in the “angelic” tendencies of the cyberculture and tele-informatics, with their proposals of the immortal mind through artificial intelligence and the overcoming of the physical space through the virtualization of the bodies in the data network, [...] (Sibilia 2006, 118)⁹⁰

As she explains further, the quest for the hypermodern man is to search for the “ethereal and eternal “essence”” by employing “artificial intelligence and biotechnologies” that contributes to “cut off life by separating it from the body” (Sibilia 2006, 118). It is what Deleuze and Guattari defined as the “body without organs”: “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole.” (Deleuze & Guattari 2005, 151) This form of disembodiment of the mind, our subjectivity, from its fleshly carcass responds to this accelerating forms of identity constructions through identities produced online. There are some examples of this form of dissociation from the body in the poems by Mira Gonzalez, which belong to her first published book of poetry *I will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together* (2013). What is fascinating about these two poems is the way Gonzalez expresses physical experiences from a detached, as almost scientifically, the interaction between two individuals, as if dissecting the sensations through the language of the specific and the unemotional. The following fragment belongs to “I just need you to know exactly what I want without me having to say anything”⁹¹:

do you remember that dream I had

⁹⁰ Como ocurre en las tendencias “angélicas” de la cibercultura y la teleinformática, con sus propuestas de inmortalidad de la mente mediante la inteligencia artificial y de superación del espacio físico a través de la virtualización de los cuerpos en las redes de datos, [...] (Sibilia 2006, 118)

⁹¹ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 322](#).

where my fingers touched your fingers
and we came to understand that our hands were capable of
expressing complex emotions as separate entities from our bodies
could you just put your mouth on my mouth next time you talk
I have been trained through operant conditioning
to react negatively to romantic emotional stimulus
now I feel comfort because your brain
is encased in a skull a few miles away from here (Gonzalez 2013, 17)

The memory of that this poem deals with is triggered by the physical contact made between “my fingers touch(ing) your fingers” (Gonzalez 2013, 17), as the poetic voice expresses her concern, and even astonishment, about how “our hands were capable of / expressing complex emotions as separate entities from our bodies” (Gonzalez 2013, 17): what she is describing is the power of bodily performative to communicate emotions. What is also interesting to note is how she is still reluctant to totally engage in such experience, as it is expressed in the lines: “I have been trained through operant conditioning / to react negatively to romantic emotional stimulus” (Gonzalez 2013, 17). The learning process that is mentioned in the poem is what is also known as *instrumental conditioning*, and which mostly consists on modifying a certain behavior by reinforcement or punishments. In Gonzalez’s case, her resistance to let her emotions overflow her by punishment, negative stimulus towards romantic demonstrations. This is what makes her avoidant since she finds “comfort because your brain / is encased in a skull a few miles away from here” (Gonzalez 2013, 17). Somehow, it seems as if the poetic voice is relieved that the connection is not at a mental level, and the other person is not able to perceive the way she is thinking about that particular situation. But at the same time, the voice of the poem seems to find appealing the idea of seducing her counterpart, of having a “loving” effect on the *Other*:

now look at my face and tell me
that my physical presence in the world
has caused you to experience extreme disequilibrium
are you able to confirm my existence
in a strictly biological sense (Gonzalez 2013, 17)

The chemical effects on the body of love and affection are clearly expressed in the line “[...] to experience extreme disequilibrium / are you able to confirm my existence in a strictly biological sense” (Gonzalez 2013, 17): is she referring to experiencing emotions as a medium to re-connect with her physical body in a physiological sense? Gonzalez’s poem seems to remind another one by Sarah Jean Alexander, “Human adults”⁹², from *Wildlives* (2015, 66-67), in particular to the way

⁹² The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 295](#).

biological metaphors are employed in order to express a set of emotions related to affection, attachment and love:

I want to tap on your skull from the outside:
Is anyone alive in there?
Is anyone alive anywhere, really?
I want to put my ear against the hair on your head
and hear the *ahhhhh* of a low, distant voice. (Alexander 2015, 66)

Contrary to the indifference and concerns for the *Other*'s well being presented in Gonzalez's poem, the perspective offered by Alexander differs in the sense that there is an interest in getting to know what the other person might be thinking, by "tap(ping) on your skull from outside" (Alexander 2015, 66). As Gonzalez also does, Alexander acknowledges that despite physical connection is possible by means of touch or direct physical contact, the ability to enter another persons' thoughts is almost impossible, even frustrating, as it shows her insistent rhetorical question: "*Is anyone alive in there? /Is anyone alive anywhere, really?*" (Alexander 2015, 66) Later, her longing for a reaction from the other person is expressed through the onomatopoeia "*ahhhhh*" (Alexander 2013, 66-67), which is repeated two more times throughout the poem. The lines from the onomatopoeia are clearly related to the myth of Echo: the nympho who fell in love with the self-absorbed Narcissus and was unable to her express her desire for him. Like Echo, Alexander's poetic voice attempts to communicate with her love interest unsuccessfully: "I am whispering *ahhhh* / and waiting for you to hear." (Alexander 2013, 67) As she recognizes her own humiliating situation by describing her way of loving as "between stupid fast love / and not being able to see." (Alexander 2013, 66). Hence, the poem by Alexander speaks from the point of view of unrequited love whereas Gonzalez sides with the unrequit(ing) part. And last, but not least, in Mira Gonzalez's "I will inevitably ruin our relationship"⁹³, the poetic voice of poem describes again her struggles to engage emotionally through bodily contact as a way to both dissociate from her own body and to disconnect from *Other(s)*:

I had this specific shitty feeling
I closed my eyes and thought about virtual particles
that cease to exist when they are not observed
the momentum of a virtual particle is uncertain according to the
uncertainty principle
it is also uncertain whether or not I existed while I was kissing you (Gonzalez 2013, 31)

In the fragment presented above, the "virtual particles" stands as a metaphor for visibility and perception: this is evident when the poetic voice relates the existence of these particular objects

⁹³ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 322](#).

through the perceptions of vision: “I closed my eyes when they are not observed / that cease to exist when they are not observed” (Gonzalez 2013, 31) It seems that the hypermodern motto of the current times is: to be seen in order to be. This is what Sibilía calls “the tyrannies of visibility” in her book *The Intimacy as Spectacle* (2008), that consists on the constant public exposure of the self, mainly through social media, that leads towards “a mere exacerbation of certain narcissism, voyeurism and exhibitionism, always latent.”⁹⁴ (Sibilía 2008, 105) As the Argentinian anthropologist suggests, one has “to *appear* in order to *be*” (Sibilía 2008, 130), which directly links one’s existence by the performativity of “appearances, the spectacle and visibility” (Sibilía 2008, 130), which is validated by “other people’s eyes and, above all, the coveted trophy of *being seen*” (Sibilía 2008, 130) In Gonzalez’s poem, the gaze of others does not only determines one’s existence, but also one’s gaze determines our own existence in the world: as she closes her own eyes while kissing, she “is also uncertain whether or not (she) existed”, which is “this specific shitty feeling” (Gonzalez 2013, 31) the poetic voice mentions at the beginning of the poem: she compares herself to the “virtual particles / that cease to exist when they are not observed” (Gonzalez 2013, 31), as the virtual bodies that disappear in front of our voyeuristic eyes when the screen shuts off. Is it really our subjectivity independent from its corporeal representation in the Internet era? How is the paradox of duality still reworked and problematized as one’s identity formation is conditioned by performativity and the influence of the online networks? In which new ways femininity is challenged and reinforced by these new technologies of the virtual?

4.1.3. W03ld W[ai]de Coc00n: SPAM-nig Net(I)Ana(S)

“Alt the very core of Alt Lit is the internet. The internet is the true location, muse and the heart of it all.” (Rae 6th November 2014, *The Lifted Brow*)

Been through some bad shit, I should be a sad bitch

Who woulda thought it’d turn me to a savage? (Ariana Grande, *7 Rings*, 2019)

As we have seen in the previous sections from this chapter, the battle between the dominance of the mind over the body has been exacerbated in the recent years due to the proliferation of various technologies, including biological procedures and the expansion of the world wide web, through which this Cartesian dichotomy has been exploded to unimaginable limits: plastic surgery; photoshop programs; *Snapchat*, *Instagram* and other mobile app filters; etc ... As Paula Sibilía puts it, the “*technologies of the virtual and immortality*” are affecting our “subjectivities and bodies” since the first ones have created a “new way of understanding and living

⁹⁴ [...] una mera exacerbación de cierto narcisismo, voyeurismo y exhibicionismo siempre latentes. (Sibilía 2008, 105)

the limits of space and time” (Sibilia 2006, 68)⁹⁵ Since time and space have been redefined by these innovative technologies, nowadays we are still reconfiguring our notions of being and living in the current times, which are determined by hectic fast-pace developments which are surpassing, somehow, our human abilities to cope with reality. The traditional notions about positioning oneself in space and time have been dramatically challenged by the emergence of virtual realities which proliferate the online sphere. This is what Sarah Jean Alexander melancholically proposes in the poem “You by way of me”⁹⁶ (2015), an interesting title that suggests that the connection between people are conditioned by our positions with regard to others. Locating the body in both time and space are determined by the hypervisual, as stated in the following lines:

If you look at the moon at midnight
And I look at the moon at 7 PM,

We will be on the opposite sides of the Atlantic
Staring at the same spot in space. (Alexander 2015, 32)

In the lines above, Alexander points out that the dematerialization of bodies does not imply a disconnection with our position in space and time, but an expansive possibility for transgressing the very notions of subjectivity and engaging with others. The time zones stated in “at midnight” and “at 7 PM”, which make two people “look at the moon”, from “the opposite sides of the Atlantic” (Alexander 2015, 32) is a clear allusion to the “abstraction of existence” that Lipovestky points out in *The Global Screen*, that originates from the “advanced process of derealization” at the same time that “a decorporalized and desensualized universe” (Lipovestky 2009, 276) is expanding and as a result of how the body stops being a reference for real existence. As Alexander suggests in her poem, people prefer interacting through a screen, a reference that is implied at the line “staring at the same spot in space” (Alexander 2015, 32). This line clearly acknowledges that one’s presence online has become the epitome of existing: we are stared at, therefore we exist; contemporarily twisting Hamlet’s famous lines. Our subjectivities, in the purest Cartesian sense, are transcending our corporeal existence in new and various ways. But at the same time, the voice of the poem is aware of how this can exponentially become a threat, as it stated as follows next:

No one ever tells you to stare at the sun.
That would be dangerous. It would hurt too much

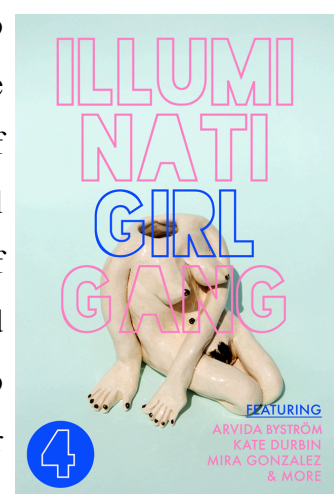
⁹⁵ Las subjetividades y los cuerpos contemporáneos se ven afectados por las *tecnologías de la virtualidad* y la *inmortalidad*, y por los nuevos modos que inauguran de entender y vivenciar los límites espacio-temporales que estas tecnologías inauguran. (Sibilia 2006, 68)

⁹⁶ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 296](#).

But if we are being honest with each other,
Isn't this supposed to? (Alexander 2015, 32)

At this point in the poem, Alexander seems to be reflecting on one of the primary concepts that *Alt Lit* literature attempts to achieve through writing: how the Internet allows to the artificial performativity of what A.D Jameson calls 'New Sincerity', which a simulated display of honesty on behalf of the author, honesty being understood as the real opinion and expression of emotions by a real person. The "sun" stands as the metaphor for illuminating as means of achieving truth, like Plato stated in his allegory of the cave: "The ascent for the upward journey of the soul into the region of the intelligible; then you will be in possession of what I surmise; since that is what you wish to be told. (...) In the world of knowledge, the last thing to be perceived and only with great difficulty is the essential Form of Goodness." (Plato 1945, 231) As Alexander also states in her poem, honesty, as one's truth, can "be (so) dangerous" for even others that "it would hurt too much" (Alexander 2015, 32): that means that revealing our true, naked, honest selves can harm others at the same time that this form of revelation of oneself is inflicting pain on oneself. That's why our online persona is just an idealized projection of the self: the truth is always, and it always be, too ugly to be freely, openly revealed to others, because it may cause pain in an uncontrolled and unexpected way. According to Han, these new media and forms of communication "dismantle" the "relation with the different" (Han 2010, 43), since the processes of "virtualization and digitalization" makes any real opposition "to disappear eventually" (Han 2010, 43) With the Internet, unreal, mediated phantasies are apparently closer to become our immediate reality.

In Ana Carrete's chapbook *Internet Girls* (2014), which was also published by Alt [C]Lit magazine *illuminati girl gang* (vol. 4, 2014), one can find the prototype of what Zafra called *Net(i)Ana(s)*: a generation of "posthuman and immaterial" women, an "alternative theoretical figuration of the Internet subject" that transgresses "the frontiers of gender, class and race", by "aris(ing) new questions on ways of being and relate to the online universe" (Zafra 2005, 23)⁹⁷ What Zafra tries to explain is that the virtual has opened the door, at least theoretically, for exploring subjectivity and finding ways of subverting realities through new languages available in the net. These new forms of construction of



**ILLUMINATI GIRL GANG
COVER MAGAZINE**

⁹⁷ *NETIANA: SUJETO POSTHUMANO* e inmaterial que n(h)ace en Internet. Figuración teórica alternativa del sujeto en red. Ficción política que rebasa las fronteras de género, clase y raza y que sugiere nuevas preguntas sobre las formas de ser y de relacionarnos en el universo on line. (Zafra 2005, 23)

the immaterial are directly connected to the production of the “immaterial”, “desire”, “meaning”, “affection and emotivity” according to Zafra (2005, 148) What Carrete makes, at least in the first lines of this long poem in the form of chapbook, these “internet girls” she speaks about are similar to the ones Zafra calls *netianas*, since both terms alludes to the creation of affective networks through the virtual medium:

and hello hi internet
girls
come to mama
haha just thought
about deleting that
and typing ‘cum 2
mama’ instead but
whoa that’s dumb
just kidding hey sup
what is shaking
internet girls [...] (Carrete, 2014, 1)

What makes Carrete’s poem so relevant for this analysis is the fact that she acknowledges that girls conform a relevant group of participants in the online sphere. Also, it is interesting to notice that the language employed belongs to that one employed in Internet chatrooms or apps, which is evident in the use of informal words: “hi”, “mama”, “cum”, “sup”, and exclamation words like “haha”, which expresses laughter, “whoa”, which shows surprise, and “hey”, which is used to draw someone’s attention. This kind of language is typical of oral conversations, and which now have been translated into digital formats, through instant messaging conversations, and which attempts to reproduce phonetically by these exclamations, and tries to imitate spoken expressions. This creates a sense of spontaneity and improvisation that is intensified by the use of the apparent lack of content in the sentences and the irrelevant triviality depicted through them, miming a daily-life conversation. At the same time, the lines “hey sup/ what is shaking internet girls” (Carrete 2014, 1) shows a need to connect with others, a need to reach out to others like her in the immense vastness of the world wide web, a group of girls’ bonding that reminds one of the importance of human relations, even when those ones are transformed by the interference of Internet in our daily lives as well as in our intimate interactions.

What is interesting to note is that the “internet girls” that Carrete speaks about in her poem is an identity of its own, which can be associated or even included in that one of Zafra’s *netianas*, since “the visual-digital” has become a “new power location, connected to the body as an inscription field of socio-symbolic codes which converges with the machine” (Zafra 2005, 23), and

which makes gender a complex construction developed in an online context (Zafra 2005, 23-22). According to Jaquet-Chiffelle and his group of researchers, contemporary identities are a complex topic to deal with, since the proliferation of new subjectivities online have affected the way one perceives a subject: “On the Internet, it can be hard to know if the entity we are interacting with is of flesh and blood, or only digital. We are now facing a complex reality both in the ‘real’ world and in the information society. We have to deal with subject acting behind masks” (Jaquet-Chiffelle et al. 2009, 78) For this very reason, their research on the *polymorphus* nature of identities nowadays are categorized in two main ones: “physical” and “virtual (or abstract) entities” (Jaquet-Chiffelle et al. 2009, 80) What is interesting to point out from Jaquet Chiffelle’s study is the conceptualization of the “mask” as role-playing through which “virtual persons” perform and even develop an alternative identity parallel to their “physical” one:

Virtual persons play the role of a mask. In front of the mask, we have the identity. Several physical persons can hide behind the mask. When several persons share an identity, they are all linked to the same virtual person. The shared identity becomes in our model a shared virtual identity. (...) physical entities behind the virtual persons should not be reduced to physical persons only.

We introduce the concept of subjects in order to include the possibility of having non-human physical entities behind virtual persons. Intuitively speaking, a subject is any physical entity that can hide behind a virtual person. (Jaquet-Chiffelle, Benoist, Haenni, Wenger & Zwingelberg 2009, 82)

The combination between the Internet and language is also an important concept to consider when one reads Carrete’s works. In another of her chapbooks, *Why Fi* (2014), there is the poem “404 NOT FOUND”, which is full of Internet imagery, that perfectly poeticizes the hybrid condition of the post-modern individual, a sort of prophecy turned into reality, that dystopian fantasy that Haraway wrote about in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, originally published in 1984. In Haraway’s text, the cyborg identity is presented as a “creature in a postgender world” (Haraway 2016, 8) that transgresses the thin boundary between human and animal, and gracefully sneaks out of the “distinction between animal-human (organism) and machine.” (Haraway 2016, 11) Etheral, invisible, cryptographic, the cyborg identity raises as the future alternative to the collapsing totalitarian-identity system we are still immersed in nowadays. As Haraway and others argue, the “informatics of domination” is implicit in the



UNTITLED BY TETSUYA ISHIDA (1998)

transition from “an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system – from all work to all play, a deadly game.” (Haraway 2016, 28) This cyber- hybridization of the organic with the robotics reminds of Tetsuya Ishida’s paintings, which are full of examples of the mechanization of human beings at the expenses of capitalistic exploitation and repression: workers as isolated machines which repeat routines and working processes until exhaustion. In a process that Zoë Sofia calls *techno-digestion* (Haraway 2016, 32), a process that also involves not only converting the organic into the technological, but also a “translation of the world into a problem of coding” (Haraway 2016, 34): information becomes the unit through which anything else is measured and mediated through microelectronics, which is “the technical basis of simulacra- that is of copies without originals” (Haraway 2016, 36), as Haraway suggests in the following passage:

Microelectronics mediates the translations of labor into robotics and word processing, sex into genetic engineering and reproductive technologies, and mind into artificial intelligence and decision procedures. (Haraway 2016, 36)

In popular culture, many contemporary millennial female musicians have explored cyborg identity as a concept for their artistic productions, one of them is Janelle Monae’s popular album *Archandroid* (2010). The concept of this album inspired by German expressionist and science-fiction movie *Metropolis*⁹⁸, directed by Fritz Lang in 1927, which portrays a dystopian futuristic city in which a robot leads a

rebellion of the oppressed workers, who live underground, against intellectual elites who hold the power by living in the surface: a structural urban dichotomy that

clearly symbolizes the hierarchical representation of the social stratum divided through classes. Monae adds to this inspirational source Afrofuturistic features in order to depict herself as a “messianic android”, a kind of millennial cyborg, who sings about love and identity issues by fighting against repression and injustice, especially those faced by LGBT and POC minorities (Sterritt 24th October 2013, *Transchordian*) More recently, Canadian artist



**METROPOLIS BY FRITZ LANG
(1927)**



**JANELLE MONAE'S ANCHANDROID
COVER (2010)**

⁹⁸ *Metropolis*' trailer: <http://www.sensacine.com/peliculas/pelicula-240/trailer-19508662/?jwsources=c1>

Grimes released her MV single, *We Appreciate Power*⁹⁹, which clearly resonates with Monae's idea of cyborgs taking control over humans, but in Grimes' case, rather than rebellion, it sounds more like a *coup d'état*, justifying the tendency towards AI domination as the next step in evolution. Part of the lyrics at the end of the Grimes' song goes as follows:

Neanderthal to human being
Evolution, kill the gene
Biology is superficial
Intelligence is artificial
Submit (Grimes, *We Appreciate Power*, 2018)



STILL FROM *WE APPRECIATE POWER* VIDEOCLIP BY GRIMES, 2018.

As Haraway predicted, Grimes seems to depict a futuristic vision, influenced by visual aesthetics of classical anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*¹⁰⁰ (1994), and proposes a lyric AI manifesto that seems to favor the “microelectronics” as the form of mediation that Haraway speaks about in the following lines: “But AI will reward us when it reigns / Pledge allegiance to the world's most powerful computer / Simulation is the future” (Grimes *We Appreciate Power* 2018) Throughout the music video, Grimes displays a cyborg-phantasy imagery which shows up the coming of A.I. dominance through the virtual *simulacra* of reality. In Melissa Broder's poem “Knowledge is power no it's not”¹⁰¹, from *Scarecrone* (2014) the lyrics reproduce a random stream of consciousness that

⁹⁹ *We Appreciate Power* by Grimes (2019): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYG_4vJ4qNA

¹⁰⁰ *Neon Genesis Evangelion* opening credits: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-QSmNReDyI>

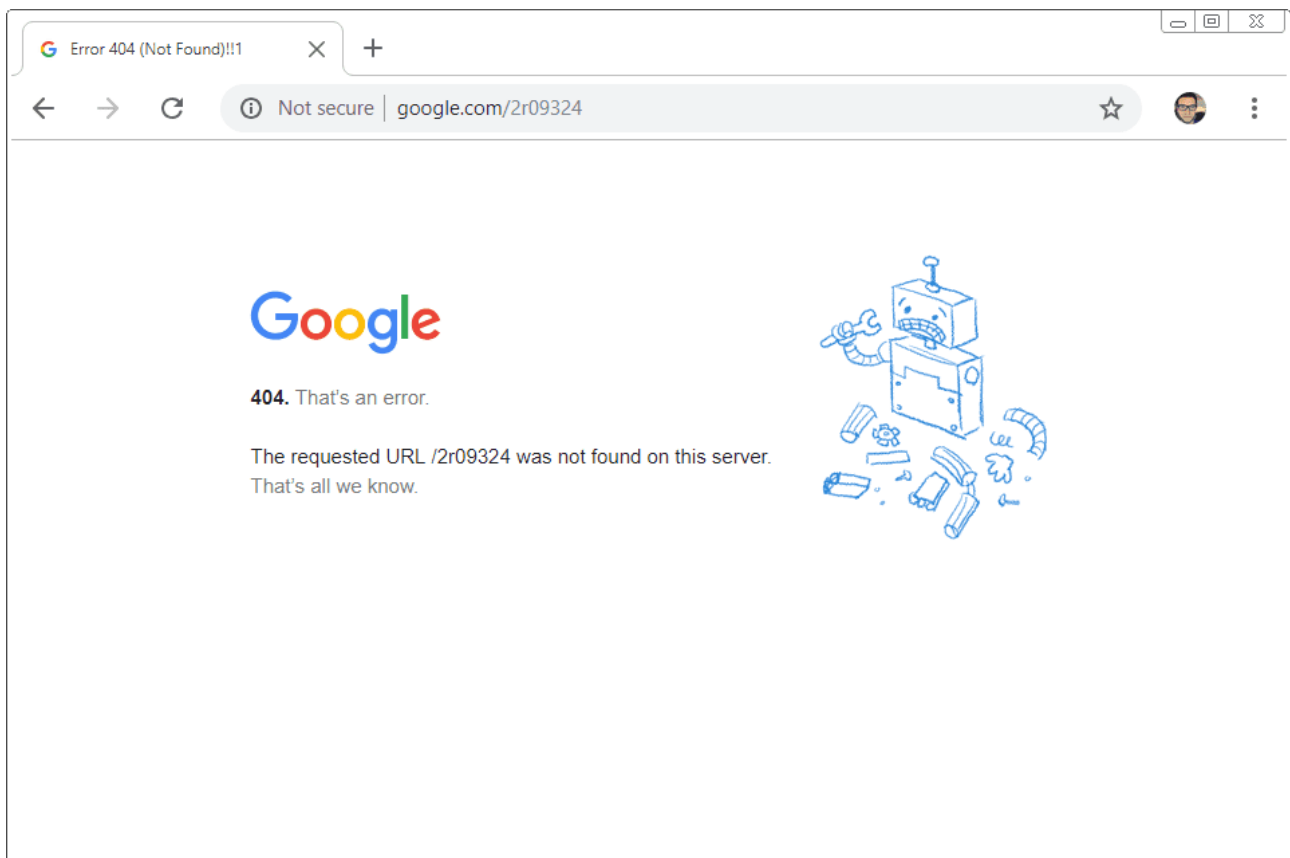
¹⁰¹ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2](#), page 308.

reminds of the online incoherent verbosity of *Twitter*, in which we can find lines such as “Shut me up with a computer” or “The instruments pixelated like you” (Broder 2014, 43). In this poem, the lines between the virtual and reality become a blurry one as the need for being constantly connected (“Shut me up with a computer”) distorts our perception of others (“The instruments pixelated like you”). Returning to Carrete’s poem “404 NOT FOUND”, the poet displays the informatics dominion over Millennials’ existence as how computers function, as it is shown at the beginning:

open a tab and type loading
turn airport off
page fails
turn airport on
loading my love life on the internet
chemicals happening getting excited about the world
wide web that cocoons me
cosy warm wide web
long silky envelope (Carrete 2014, 4)

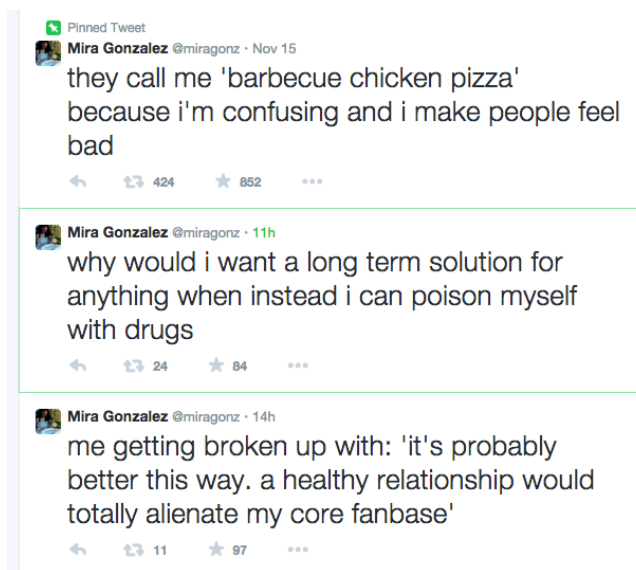


NEON GENESIS EVANGELION
BY HIDEAKI ANNO (1994)



SAMPLE OF 404 NOT FOUND ERROR.

The language employed mixes Internet terminology with lyricism in order to make a statement: the boundary between the virtual world and the real one is becoming blurry. The attraction to the online world is so appealing that the average amount of time a person spends in front of a computer with Internet connection is increasing over the years, according to many reports: “more than six hours a day” on the Internet according to a report made by *Hoot Suit* and *We are Social* (Salim, February 4th 2019, *Digital Information World*) In this sense, one can remark the extreme importance the Internet has in people’s life and its influence in our way of conceiving the world and how we relate to it is closely connected at the same time. The title itself, “404 NOT FOUND”, refers to an error message that is an HTTP standard response code indicating that the client was able to communicate with a given server, but the server could not find what was requested: most times it appears when a user attempts to follow a broken or dead link. This phenomenon is what exactly happens in this poem, which describes in detail many people’s routines when getting in front of their computers or mobile devices: “opening a tab”, which is a computer interface used for navigating webpages, and where you “type” an web address for “loading”, but the speaker playfully types “loading”, disabling the airport connection in order to have access to a

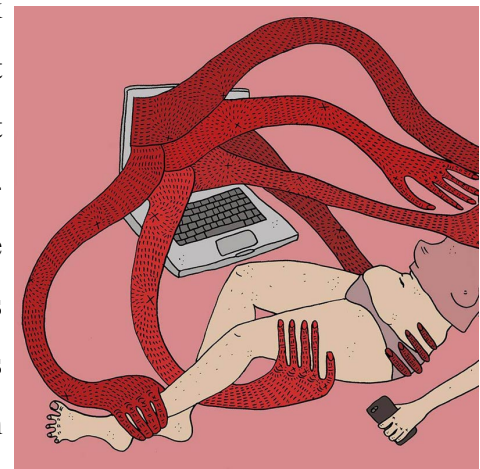


MIRA GONZALEZ'S *TWITTER* FEED SAMPLE.

wireless signal, but then the “page fails” (Carrete 2014, 4) Then, enabling the airport connection again, which is switching off the Internet connection, leads the poem towards to a stream of consciousness, in which the poetic voice reflects on the addiction to the Internet as a toxic verbosity of intimacy: we make publicly online our personal lives through various media platforms, like Facebook. As Gonzalez will publish in her *Collected Tweets* (2015), early social media was a new ground for experimenting first person narration about one’s

life with the expectation, and even fear, of not being attractive enough for generating a potential engaging audience: “I’m already confused as to what I’m supposed to twitter about. My life isn’t interesting.” (Gonzalez 2015, 2) This is supposed to be the first tweet with which Gonzalez started her official *Twitter* account in February 2010.

This seems to be a nonsense motivation that fills the actual need of sharing whatever belongs to the real world and our personal lives across the world wide web, as it is stated in Carrete's poem: "loading my love life on the internet / chemicals happening getting excited about the world" (Carrete 2014, 4) Afterwards, the voice compares the Internet to a "cocoon", which can be interpreted as the comparison to a spider that predares their victims using their webs in order to trap their victims, and then captures them by wrapping them with silk, forming a cocoon: "long silky envelope". This kind of predation causes a kind of Stockholm syndrome to the victims, since "this short envelope that protects me from spam" (Carrete 2014, 4), which previously is described as "cosy warm". This image of the wide web as cocoon that traps you like the spider-web catches its prey reminds of that of British illustrator Polly Nor's "Stuck on You" (April 2015), in which evil red tentacles reaches out from a computer screen in order to rock a floating body that holds a phone on her hand, symbolizing our emotional co-dependency on technology and the virtual. This shows the attraction that the Internet world exerts on people. "Spam" has some connotations apart from being the unsolicited e-mails people receive every day, like some viruses or bacteria which are sexually transmitted through unprotected sexual practices.



STUCK ON YOU BY POLLY NOR (2015)

This can be deduced from the close position between the words "spam" and "babies" (Carrete 2014, 4), suggesting that the Internet, somehow, prevents people from having sex in the real world, mainly due to the wide access to pornographic content for free that control libidinal impulses:

long or in my case short envelope
 short envelope that protects me from spam
 and babies are us newsletters i don't have any
 babies someone make me unsubscribe
 these emails are making me want some
 turn airport on and land on my wait
 unbutton my tabs
 use cursive script on my stomach
 turn airport on and off and on and off
 and on again (Carrete 2014, 4)

The struggle between the real and the virtual is stated in "someone make me unsubscribe / these emails are making me want some" (Carrete 2014, 4), followed by enabling the airport connection again and landing "on my wait". These lines seem to refer to the tendency that people

have to fill the boredom of waiting-time without nothing to do or to look for distraction at their phones or digital devices. Furthermore, the process of hybridization between the physical identity with the virtual one turns up to be interpreted as a metaphor for cyber-sex: “turn airport on and land on my wait / unbutton my tabs / use cursive script on my stomach” (Carrete 2014, 4) The “turn airport on” can be interpreted as the sexual arousal and excitement that anticipates the sexual encounter whereas “land on my wait” expresses the desire to be sexually touched, or even more explicitly, to be penetrated, like a plane (the penis) landing on the landing track (the vagina). This sexual metaphor finishes with the male orgasm, the semen spread over the body like “cursive script on my stomach” (Carrete 2014, 4), in order to avoid pregnancy, normally known as *withdrawal method*, since the voice previously states “i don’t want to have any / babies” (Carrete 2014, 4). The last two lines represent this struggle of constantly living offline and online, compared to the sexual desire of total union of two separate entities: that one between human and cyborg. As Zafra, the mediation of the screen as “an interface” that “liminally join(s) our bodies to online relations” and become the “‘necessary’ appendixes of our habitation in a connected world” (Zafra 2015, 16). What seems more evident is that Haraway’s vision of the hybridization between the human and cyborg is made by the mediation of computer and mobile devices as platforms through which we are connected. The dangers of such connectivity are denounced in M.I.A.’s song “The Message”¹⁰², which is included in her political-manifesto album *Vickileaks* (2010), as the lyrics follows like this:

Head-bone connects to the neck-bone
 Neck-bone connects to the arm-bone
 Arm-bone connects to the hand-bone
 Hand-bone connects to the internet
 Connected to the Google
 Connected to the government.

Head-bone connects to the headphones
 Headphones connect to the iPhone
 iPhone connected to the internet
 Connected to the Google
 Connected to the government (M.I.A. 2010)



M.I.A.'S *VICKILEAKS* (2010)

Through a beat that resembles the compulsive typing to a keyboard and a clicking to a computer mouse, the SriLankan-British rapper and artist reports the digital surveillance to which society has willingly submitted to thanks the alluring pixelated lights that emanates from our screens: this is what Zafra has described as a need for “participat(ing) in the space that it generates

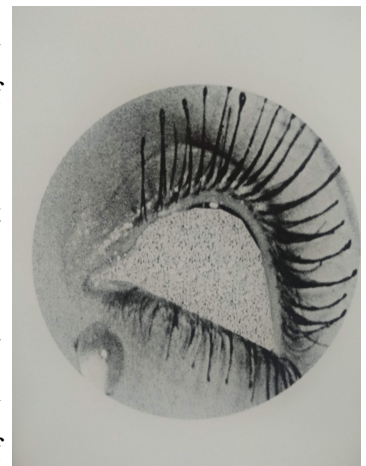
¹⁰² M.I.A.’s “The Message” track (2010): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ysGldHghyY>

with its own vital experience, committing it in a space that symbolically identifies it, which it considers its own” (Zafra 2015, 25) Furthermore, Carrete also seems to explore this sickening longing for the virtual in order to live in her poem “y2k” from *Baby Babe* (2012), in which the author expresses her concerns about the dystopian possibility of the disappearance of technology from our lives as a tragedy:

if computers stopped
working i would seriously
consider this
masochistic
ongoing desire

and replace
my eyes with marbles (Carrete 2012, 49)

In this poem, we can analyze two facts: the first one, the possibility of a virtual apocalypse, in which “computers” would undergo another *Year 2000 Problem* or *Millennium Bug*, also known as “y2k”, which consisted on a computer bug associated to the inability of most computer software programs to distinguish between the year 2000 and the year 1900. Carrete employs this computer bug as a metaphor to understand the emotional dependency that Millennials have for computers and the need for being constantly connected online: “if computers stopped / working i would seriously / consider this / masochistic / ongoing desire” (Carrete 2012, 49) Carrete seems to establish a parallelism between a “masochistic ongoing desire” (Carrete 2012, 49) with Internet addiction, a fact that is evident in the power dynamics established between Haraway’s “Informatic domination” and the gradual submission of people towards it, since, as Braidotti stated, “technology” has become “a material and symbolic apparatus”, “a semiotic and social agent among others” (Braidotti 1996, 1) in contemporary Postmodern society. The poem ends with two interesting lines that brings one to the mind Zafra’s concept of *ocularcentrism*: “and / replace my eyes with marbles” (Carrete 2012, 49) Zafra defines *ocularcentrism* as the way of perceiving and knowing about the world through the domination of the eye’s, the power of vision in order to validate and interpret reality (Zafra 2018, 45). Now “machines of *seeing*” are allowing the possibility of creating a “new form of power over subjects and bodies” (Zafra 2019, 49), that is displayed through our digital devices and diverse social media:



CARRETE 4, 2012.

In this scenery, that I will call online culture, is defined by the cohabitation and construction of a *world* and *subjectivity* through the screens in a context of visual excess (image, information, data ...) A context characterized in a frame where form of *cognitive* or *informative capitalism* lives together with other forms of *social economy* which is created by the citizenship. (Zafra 2018, 39)¹⁰³

In the poem, Carrete seems to notice the importance of the politics of seeing digital images, of being connected through the eyes to the screen of our devices in order to consume culture, which is also emphasized in the image included in this book that immediately follows the poem: a blank



LAURA CALLAGHAN'S *PICK ME*
UP SERIES (2015)

eye, no pupil no iris, just a teardrop falling down from the lacrimal.

This image brings us to the mind that of Medusa turning her victims into stone, just like the blank screen turns our eyes into “marbles”, unable to see outside the digital. Another popular online illustrator, Laura Callaghan, has portrayed Millennial culture through her colorful and detailed illustrations, like the one shown above, in which a girl is surrounded by her laptop, mobile phone and other technology-related devices. Like Polly Noir, Carrete, as well as Callaghan, remarks the vital importance and impact of technology in younger generations lives, to the point of becoming embodied, as it

happens more radically in Ishida's previous work, part of our anatomy and subjectivity, conditioning how one interacts with the environment. As Plant suggests in *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women + The New Technoculture* (1997), a parallelism can be established between the weaver and the surfer as agents of production in the different contexts of the analogical and the digital:

The weaver and the loom, the surfer and the Net: none of them are anything without the engineerings which they both capture and perpetuate. (Plant 1997, 81)

This reference makes me to return to the first section from chapter three¹⁰⁴ of this Thesis, where I described in great detail and already established a connection between female creativity, which has been traditionally associated to the minor-arts practices of weaving and patching, to the workings of computer engineering, and particularly, to the networking politics of online art and culture. Having established the evident connection between cultural and subjectivity production in

¹⁰³ Este escenario, al que llamaré cultura-red, viene definido por la convivencia y construcción de *mundo* y *subjectividad* a través de las pantallas en un contexto excedentario en lo visual (imagen, información, datos ...). Contexto caracterizado en un marco donde conviven formas de *capitalismo cognitivo* o *informacional* con otras formas de *economía social* que surgen desde la ciudadanía.

¹⁰⁴ **3.1.** Weavers, Spinners and Looms: (Web)analogies of Women's Text-making.

the digital sphere, I would like to continue exploring in the next section how female identity, in particular the sexual one, is performed online through its various visual platforms and how this is shaping new ways of living sexuality in and out of the (fe)male body in the Informatics Era.

4.2. Bad Grrrl(s) ‘just (vv)anna have fvn’: Masturbatory [Sad]-Mess

If we are to understand how a little girl becomes a woman, we must pursue the further vicissitudes of this excitability of the clitoris. (Sigmund Freud, *Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 2016, 72)

The women, I think, were using sex as a gateway for the love they were seeking. The men, I think, were using love as a gateway for the sex they were seeking.

Melissa Broder- *So Sad Today* (2015, 11)

As we have seen in the previous section, a process of virtualization has been transferred into the configuration of online subjectivities that are affected by their spatial isolation. When an individual, in this particular case a young woman, interacts socially, specially by exposing her body image publicly in social media, her self-esteem is radically dependent on the acceptance she receives on the Internet. That affectivity is expressed on the virtual feedback recorded on different online platforms: to be liked or to be disliked, that is the question. Hearts, thumbs up, emojis: that is how affection works virtually. According to Remedios Zafra, there is a clear correlation between “being seen in the screen with existing for the world (our world) and being part of the new logics of “value” in context.” (Zafra 2016, 134) This “value” she refers to is inextricably linked to the relevance of the visuals, either edited, altered or modified images: whatever you see is whatever you get. The screen as an interface works also as a shopping window, where people expose themselves as a marketable brands without getting a direct profit for themselves, but instead this model provides them with “the production of identities separated from the body, displaced, and usually hidden in our online interpersonal relations.” (Zafra 2015, 16) Zafra’s proposal goes beyond capitalistic commercialization of the body: it offers the alternative visualization of endless possibilities about total body independence for the creation of multiple identities.

But, what happens when the body becomes the embodiment of sexual performativity? Pornography is the first idea that crosses one’s mind. Now that explicit sex and the representations of different and diverse sexualities and bodies populates the world wide web, making this type of content fully accessible at just one click, there has been much speculation about whether this is a positive thing to celebrate or a negative one to censor. Sex is always a tricky subject, but when this matter intersects with female bodies’ and their representation, much more problematics are added to this explosive mix. Feminists have long discussed, and even argued, about whether pornography should be or not legal, whether is a place from which to reclaim sexual autonomy as well as to rethink our sexualities through diversity of points of views and perspectives. As a representation of socio-cultural nature, diverse opinions have risen, creating irreconcilable stances.

Many have seen that “[...] pornography is about power and sex-as-weapon” (Steinem 1980, 38), which has nothing to do with sexuality at all. One of the most fervent anti-pornography voices was radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, who provided the following fascinating definition from an etymological perspective:

The word *pornography*, derived from the ancient Greek *porne* and *graphos*, means “writing about whores. *Porne* means “whore,” specifically and exclusively the lowest class of whore, which in ancient Greece was the brothel slut available to all male citizens. (Dworkin 1981, 119)

According to Dworkin’s argument, pornography portrays women as mere prostitutes, and this has contributed to the generalized perception of women’s sexuality “[...] as low and whorish in and of itself” (Dworkin 1981, 201), since it constantly contributes to the acceptance of “the debasing of women [...] to be the real pleasure of sex” (Dworkin 1981, 201). Nowadays, the availability of this visual performative genre has spread and diversified the industry itself, generating net worth of \$97 billion annually (Ropelato 28th March 2014, *TopTenReviews*). The pornography industry has well adapted to the new times, since it has multiple accessible and mostly free platforms through which distribute its materials and contents: from mainstream billionaire productions, to DIY home-films, to the alternative indie vibe and the online webcam peep-shows: just with a single click. This overexposure is what Byung Chul Han would express as the annihilation of “[...] every possibility of erotic communication” (Han 2017, 22), and he even agrees that this is due to the fact that “capitalism intensifies the advance of the pornographic in society, as for exposing and exhibiting everything as merchandise.” (Han 2017, 38). Pornography is not just the a sexual representation of a sort of gendered violence, of visual pleasure or the performativity of arousal: it has also become the monetization of the staging of the erotics; the more explicit and degenerated, the better.

The “industries of the I” that Zafra talks about have been originated through the creation of digital platforms that generate multiple “images of the world and images of the self” and allow the *live* proliferation of “every possible form of self-exhibition” (Zafra 2015, 213). Most of these images “help us to reinforce an identity model of the self” (Zafra 2015, 213), which is also contributing to the configuration of new “symbolic structures” based on “contemporary visual imagery” (Zafra 2015, 213). As visual imagery, pornography or graphic depictions of sex conform part of these new symbolic structures, which populate our virtual minds and worlds. Sontag talked about this issue in her essay *The Pornographic Imagination* (1967), where she stated that pornography “[...] has the power to ingest and metamorphose and translate all concerns that are fed into it, reducing everything into the one negotiable currency of the erotic imperative.” (Sontag 1967, 214). The pornographer possesses a “morbid-mindedness” that understands the activity that surrounds her “as

a set of sexual exchanges.” (Sontag 1976, 229) Therefore, pornography as a genre has the capacity for transforming and translating any human interaction into a performative sexual act of any bizarre, and even disturbing, nature. As Virginie Despentes describes in *King Kong Theory* (2006), pornography hits us “directly to the center of fantasies, without any word or reflective mediation” (Despentes 2010, 76), but it rather “frees desires and promise the satisfaction too fast as to allow a sublimation” (Despentes 2010, 76) Since it becomes a form of mediation rather than an end itself, hence its strategies consist in constantly delaying the achievement of the orgasm’s release of erotic tension.

As for Paul B. Preciado puts it in *Testo Junkie* (2008), he conceives us as currently living under a system that comes from a combination between pharmaceutical and pornographical industries under neo-liberalist capitalistic dynamics which regulates bodies through the reproductive



WE'RE ALWAYS IN TOUCH BY WE NEVER TOUCH BY LORDESS FAUDRE (2020)

technologies and social normativity: this is the *pharmacopornographic* era. Inside this whole biosocial regulating system, pornography is understood in various terms, but what interests us now more is its functionality as “a masturbatory virtual device” in which “sexuality is transformed into a spectacle, virtual digital information” (Preciado 2013, 365-266), a form of “tele-techno-masturbation”, capable of “stimulat(ing) [...] the biochemical and muscular mechanisms that regulate the production of pleasure.” (Preciado 2013, 365-366) This techno-chemical manipulation of our hormones in order to

control arousal is mediated by and performed through images, mostly in a filmic manner. The body becomes instrumentalized, in virtual shape, in order to excite in its absence. Schaschek goes even further and proposes that the junction between “sexual pleasure and technology” results from “making the body of the actor and the viewer interact with the filmic apparatus.” (Schaschek 2014, 54) This technological bound through virtual sex is reinforced by the intimacy provided by one’s room, which also generates another forms of virtual sex such as *sexting*. This phenomena happens at the beginning of the chapter “Love Like You Are Trying To Fill an Insatiable Spiritual Hole With Another Person Who Will Suffocate in There” from Melissa Broder’s *So Sad Today* (2015), about that time she started to chat with an online fan: “was it love when we met on the Internet? [...] He poked and messaged and “liked” and faved my every Internet itch.” (Broder 2015, 38) In the words of Remedios Zafra, the sexual imagination projects an ideal image of the Other person who we met online, gathering scraps of his visual and written information in order to create an idea about that person: “One’s own touch and reciprocal writing is

sufficient to suspend “what might be,” to not yield to the doubt about whether both of them have been invented by the same person or are just an illusion, fruit of need to love.” (Zafra 2012, 71) Instead of a bar or a club, the mating-match is produced “inside the room of one’s own, a kingdom of privacy” (Zafra 2012, 71). In this kind of dynamics affection, “onscreen love” makes a loop of “an anxiety about writing and waiting; waiting for love becomes the reason for being connected.” (Zafra 2012, 73) Writing, texting, the visual manifestation of language has substituted touch, physical contact, a fact that is masterfully represented in the digital composition by the Internet artist Lordess Faudre¹⁰⁵, which is shown above: “we’re always in touch but we never touch”. Considering these paradoxes, I will analyze in the following sections how virtuality is re-configuring affectivity, sexuality and our bodies in more intimate level.

4.2.1. The v3(:r)tual P0rn-utopy@: F33ding the V0iD’s D@t@

As any socio-cultural representation, pornography reproduces a series of social conventions that reflect diverse practices that intersect at various institutional, spacial and temporal levels. Most commonly, the purpose of pornography is understood in terms of entertainment, and as part of this industry, delivering less than what it promises (Braidotti 1994, 69). For such aim, the *simulacrum* of sex is made “[...] through the spectacle of organs interpenetrating each other, [...] it rests on the fantasy that visibility and truth work together.” (Braidotti 1994, 69). Therefore, the pornographic spectacle relies more on the recreation of expectations and the delay of the orgasmic-release climax in order to engage, or rather to get the audience hooked in order to keep their interest on its content, even most of depictions follow the same conventions and patterns of repressive sexual normativity. But why is this obsession about sex representation? Virtuality has created a complex paradox, one in which we are still living in a corporeal existence while our minds are totally embedded to digitally manipulated realities: dissociation becomes the very juncture at which the cyborg subjects wanders about like a tightrope walker dangerously tries to find her balance and not succumb falling into the nothingness. Pornography is the promise of sex, which is the ultimate intimate contact between individuals, the total fusion between bodies. As Orbach explains in *Bodies* (2009), sex creates a series of “sensation” that “[...] are intense and remind us that we can be excited, touched and moved rather than simply experiencing our body as a performance” (Orbach 2009, 145). In other words, sex and intimacy help one to outreach and reconnect with the fact that we inhabit a physical body, one that feels and aches in its most overwhelming, pleasurable and unimagined forms: “sexual sensations can bring authenticity to our bodily responses even if they are unable to

¹⁰⁵ Lordess Faudre’s Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/lordess.foudre/?hl=es>

produce a body sense that feels reliable and stable for the individual” (Orbach 2009, 145) as Orbach would nicely put it. I would like to remark here the term “authenticity” in connection to “our bodily responses”: it makes sense to think that if one can feel grounded through bodily experiences, that of specially related to releasing sensations in order to reconnect with one’s emotions and making one feel alive, authentic, then something clicks.

If sex is the performativity of our most authentic sensual self, then pornography is the performativity of those sexual acts that potentially makes one re-join to those past experiences. Then sex becomes “the place where people can be sufficiently vulnerable and open and find the confirmation that they and their body are all right, acceptable, beautiful and alive.” (Orbach 2009, 145) On the other hand, pornography also represents those repressed fantasies of the morbid mind, grotesque and disturbing day-dreaming visualizations of sexual acts, that belonging to the forbidden realm of puritanical moral and composure. Royo explains in *Falos y Falacias* (in English *Phallus and Fallacies*, 2018) that “sexuality is intrinsically tied, precisely, to the transgression of that moral. [...] we enjoy even more one’s own desire of transgression than with the act per se.” (Royo 2018, 184) Furthermore, the desire that is repressed is proportional to the things that provokes or repulses us, as the sexologist describes in her book. Therefore, the production of pornographic materials and their consumptions becomes the projected scapegoat of the morbid imagination and the longing of this meeting between bodies in a physical realm.

In Ana Carrete’s “loading porn”¹⁰⁶ (*Baby Babe*, 2012), we find how the consumption of porn on the Internet is compared somehow to the consumption of poetry. The metaphoric image used to portray this comparison is by the ingestion of semen after performing oral sex to a man, which is reinforced by the illustration of a penis: this one is formed by an 8, which are the testicles, followed by four (=), which conform the shaft, and a capital (D), which represents the glans. Also, the title itself “loading porn” can be compared to the illustration made by Italian artist Giulia Rosa¹⁰⁷, in which a woman is shown licking a loading bar as if she was performing oral sex on a penis. The first clue to establish the comparison is “semen isn’t toothpaste” (Carrete 2012, 91), in which it is suggested that seminal fluid is used as a mockery for brushing teeth due to the similar texture between toothpaste and semen. By the end of poem, the word “semen” is exchanged for that of “poetry,” and from the mouth it goes right down into “throat”, so the



CARRETE 93, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 312](#).

¹⁰⁷ Giulia Rosa’s *Instagram* account: <https://www.instagram.com/giuliajrosa/?hl=es>



**LOADING 99% BY GIULIA ROSA
(2019)**

speaker “swallows it.” (Carrete 2012, 91) The graphic depiction that is implied between using an explicit sexual image and alluding to how poetry must be “digested” by the reader in order to feel it also connects to the way Carrete seems to conceptualize poetry: as a bodily experience that joins our minds to our bodies, and removes everything inside us, even disgusting experiences like vomiting or ingesting semen. Or as Preciado puts it in the *Testo Junkie*, poetry and pornography works in the same manner: both “sexualize[s] production and converts the body into information,” depicting it as “closed circuit of excitation-capital-frustration-excitation-capital” (Preciado 2013, 271-272). If poetry is a textual body, then pornography is the imagery that populates it.

Carrete employs technological metaphors related to computing sciences in order to speak about bodies, concretely, about the sexual body. Another example of this feature can be found in the poem “your semen is the data your penis compresses”¹⁰⁸ (*Baby Babe*, 2012). The title encompasses an interesting analogy: the semen, that contains the sperm chromosomes X (XX for females) and Y (the combination XY for males) needed for determining biological sex, is compared to the data, which is binary sequence of (1)s and (0)s that, combined, represents information in computing systems. Therefore, there is a parallelism between X and Y chromosomes with the binary number system: as Sadie Plant proposes, “1 and 0 make another 1. Male and female add up to man.[...] The male is one, one is everything, and the female has “nothing you can see.” (Plant 1997, 39) In the second part, Carrete establishes another parallelism between “the liquid facial soap” and “semen”: the consistency and the texture of both substances are similar to her, reminding her of a pornographic facial *cumshot*. The ending line of the poem acquires an ironic tone: “i need to wash my face because the party is over” (Carrete 2012, ¿?) This is because it is suggested there that pornography is dirty, opposed to the facial soap, which is employed to clean instead. It seems that the face becomes an erotic projection of sexual intercourse through which pornographic images project visual pleasure, as Gabby Bess also shows in various of his poems, starting with “HOW TO LIVE,”¹⁰⁹ (2013, 44) which can be found in *Alone With Other People*.

The poem embodies the boundaries between reality, memory and media. The first scene we are introduced with is of the speaker taking a bath and probably watching porn in her laptop: “on the

¹⁰⁸ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 313](#).

¹⁰⁹ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, 299](#).

edge of my bathtub I watch a girl lick cum off of her face / and smile.” (Bess 2013, 44) The contrast between both images displays a sense of privacy and shared intimacy in which the watcher and the watched person embody opposite emotional states. While the actress seems to be enjoying a facial *cumshot*, the watcher is not enjoying the experience of watching it: “I can cry while watching porn when it reminds me of sex / with someone that I loved somewhere / else.” (Bess 2013, 44) Rather than being recreating herself into visual pleasure as a porn consumer would do, instead, she feels nostalgia about a past relationship, as if she was the viewer of a scene of sexual intimacy with a past partner. Instead of being stimulated by the pornographic scene, she sees herself as if she was the actress herself, showing identification and empathy rather than arousal. This empathy is recreated as a shared memory with the scenes displayed in the porn film described by the speaker:

When the girl in the video kind of does something
that she thinks is sexy but the guy laughs instead of
thinking it's sexy. When the sex is slow and it takes
some time

to figure out how to change positions without pulling out. (Bess 2013, 44)

This description, contrary to what is portrayed in another of Bess' poem, “Theoretical Violence” (*Alone With Other People*, 2013), is rather nostalgic than explicit, and closer to common sex than porn. Here, the boundaries between what the viewer is actually watching and what is actually remembering are blurry, and the factual and the emotional becomes mixed. The speaker mentally reenacts an embarrassing moment of daily life through the experience of the porn actress as if pretending to be sexy and being laughed at by your partner: moments when having sex is not rough, and the clumsy challenge of changing positions without being porn professionals. All of this is not what she is watching but what she remembers. The closing paragraph confirms one's suspicions: “my heart pushes up this heart stuff. I can feel it when / strangers that look like us are fucking.” (Bess 2013, 44) Also, this can be interpreted as a projection of the speaker's idealization of her past relationship on what she is watching, becoming an spectator of her own past and sexual life. This recreation also puts into question if she is actually focused on the sexual part of that relationship or on the emotional part that awakes with the resemblances of the scenes and images depicted in the porn film she is watching. Therefore, we can see the manner in which Bess portrays sexual experience, always remarking the importance and the influence of pornography in a young woman's sexuality. On the one hand, we see in “Theoretical Violence,” which is analyzed in more depth in chapter 5, how the pornographic imagery conditions her way of perceiving and experiencing sex; whereas in “HOW TO LIVE” it is porn that triggers memories on her sexual life

and past relationships, establishing an peculiar connection between sexually explicit images and the emotional flashbacks.

Continuing with Bess' poetry, "TRAVEL SOUTH"¹¹⁰, also from *Alone with Other People* (2013), is yet again an ode to loneliness: how it triggers imagination and fantasy through blurring the boundaries between reality and the digital world. The title can be interpreted as going or coming down (geographically or sexually speaking); or if we consider the other possible meanings of the similar expression "go south", like "to disappear" or "to drop out of sight." The poem starts presenting the speaker at her bedroom, isolated from the rest of the world, which is represented by the window, the transparent crystal barrier that separates her from the rest of the world, as if she was the Lady of Shalott separated from society in her tower: "The window to my bedroom / muffles louder things / that are happening just on the other side." (Bess 2013, 82) This emphasizes the physical social distance that is put by invisible virtual boundaries: the world net that keeps all of us together and apart at the same time. In this line, the speaker reflects on the nature of being human, now highly technologized, and our fatal destinies of being cut off of life without finishing with all our purposes in life, even herself: "Though I know that we are just animal machines that / will one day leave / a final task uncompleted" (Bess 2013, 82) It is interesting to point out the fact that Bess employs the term "animal machines" in order to describe people nowadays, which reminds what Haraway explains in her *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985): "The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed." (Haraway 2016, 11) Bess implies that there is nothing else to do so one can finally stop and die without leaving things "uncompleted" behind: like a ghost with unfinished business and being unable to move on to the afterlife, a thought that shows up human beings' anxiety towards death.

In a sense, Bess' lines remind us that despite the apparent illusion of immortality offered by cyber subjectivities, the body behind it is just a mortal one due to our biologically driven-mortality: that belonging to the animal realm rather than the virtually projected one. Later, the speaker explicitly expresses a need for human contact at a more personal level that confirms again our animalistic attachments: "I want to feel soft next to a body that feels soft A body / that breathes like I breathe: / In and out "(Bess 2013, 82) These lines show a need for human contact, like emotional support is used to help children to get over the physical separation from their parents, which is particular relevant since it is conceived as a way to stay in touch with our early memories of intimate contact in the maternal uterus, by feeling another body that is alive, through the primal instinct of survival by breathing. This also connects to her memories of intimacy with a past partner:

¹¹⁰ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 300](#).

I remember when we used to lay on your bed, stacked
lovers,
and breathe into each other's mouths as practice
for when we would inevitably have to live and survive
underwater together (Bess 2013, 82)

This image brings up a tender post-coital scene, which is something unusual to find in Bess' heavily porno influenced poetry: the bodies lying upon each other, motionless, exhausted, while kissing each other like performing a CPR in order to survive in a reality that suffocates them like an "underwater" dystopia. She even acknowledges that when these memories haunts her, she lets herself "bathed in the nostalgia of events obfuscated by time", idealizing their relationship by remembering "small things about you for upwards of 6 hours", like it also happens in the poem "HOW TO LIVE," previously analyzed in this same section. This obsession with the past is even more evident when she compares how much their relationship has changed since then: "Now, I appreciate the emotions / that you have toward me / (of goodwill and continued interest in how I spend my days) / but I wish it could be love" (Bess 2013, 83); she complains about he seems to show no interest on her the way she would like to:

but knowing that you are there as I am alone, as we are
being pushed apart
at a rate of 5 miles per hour
by a migrating pod of whales.

Every year, starting in the late summer, the whales begin
to travel south

and every year,
the whales move us further away from each other.
We are suspended in the sea. (Bess 2013, 83)

This need for longing what it is not physically present, as a need for being alone and wanting what is impossible to be, a physical distance that is out of her control, like "being pushed apart [...] by a migrating pod of whales" (Bess 2013, 83); this reminds of other of Bess' poems, "20 mg/day," which is discussed in greater detail in chapter 3, section 3.1.3., and where whales symbolizes loneliness. These entities also represent how external and more powerful forces influence their breakup, despite her feelings trying to put them back together. The whales' fantasia even continues a little further in order to connect us with the title of the poem itself: "Travel South" embodies how the distance between them over the years is as far away from each other as it is emotionally speaking. The speaker feels isolated like the little islands floating over the immensity of



LOVE BY SASHA GREY.

the ocean. This is an overwhelming feeling that makes her aware of getting older too, as if losing relationships of any kind is part of getting to different stages throughout life.

In the next lines, we have a shocking closing, in which the Cartesian ‘I think therefore I am’ gets reinvented into contemporary terms: “My stomach goes up and down because I am breathing / and I am experiencing reality because I am breathing” (Bess 2013, 84) This statement is a clear reference to how the speaker is checking on her ability to breath and being aware of that she is breathing normally, maybe in order to avoid a panic attack: Bess seems to tell us that our basic organ activity, like breathing, reminds us daily that we are alive because of it. Despite the fact of having become, somehow, cyborgs, totally dependent on our phone or computer devices, one is still part of biologically conformed body. What is more intriguing is how the poem concludes itself: “I can see a picture of an open mouth and know / that it is Sasha Grey’s open mouth.” (Bess 2013, 84) Sasha Grey is a former porn actress, very popular and admired among the online Millennial community, who was once awarded the *Best Oral Sex Scene* in 2008 by the AVN awards, which are the porn industry’s *Oscars*, and who has already published an erotic novel, *The Juliette Society* (2013), beginning this way her literary career. This fixation with the “open mouth” can also be interpreted as a symbol about performing oral sex as if it was breathing heavily when you try



SUNMI'S *NOIR* (2019)

desperately to get as much air as you can into your lungs. Grey herself popularized this image of her “open mouth” for a clothing collection called “Love,” whose benefits formed part of a *Planned Parenthood* campaign¹¹¹. The poem as whole shows up, once again, Bess’s ability to transform the emotional into the pornographic, as a metaphor to how sensitivity can be consumed and adopted in a way that is similar to the way that we consume pornography nowadays: with the same detachment and casual way as one breathes everyday, as if giving blow jobs has become a sort of triviality itself too, like another basic physiological need. Carrete also refers to the porn actress in her poem “sasha & macaulay” (*Baby Babe*, 2012), where she humorously confuses her with someone else out of procrastinatorily boredom:

but tab number 5 is blank so i google
sasha grey and macaulay culkin
and find out he rebounds with a spanish porn star
and she show off her skills (Carrete 2012, 89)

The fact that Carrete and Bess both mention Sasha Grey as a recognizable “open mouth” says a lot about the importance of the porn industry in the configuration of contemporary popular culture: the Millennial sex symbol is a porn actress who also has a wide fanbase and popularity

¹¹¹ **Sasha Grey’s Official “Love” Collection:** <https://represent.com/store/sashagrey>

online. Freud claimed that the oral stage, or as he accurately names it, “cannibalistic pregenital sexual organization,” consists on the identification of “sexual activity” with that of “ingestion of food”: “the sexual aim consists in the incorporation of the object-prototype of a process which, in the form of identification, is later to play such an important psychological part.” (Freud 1963, 64) Following this trail of thought, it is also interesting to point out to the orally erotic metaphor of “love” that Grey is portraying by analyzing how affectivity and social media work together: the way we consume the feed displayed at our social media becomes an affective exchange of mostly heart-shaped likes that circulate as a form of virtually social communication. Many contemporary artists have illustrated this criticism through the same platforms they are critical about. A mainstream example of this is the videoclip for *Noir* (2019)¹¹² by Kpop artist Sunmi, in which she is shown eating a hear-shaped candy at various frames as a satiric critique of media’s validation and celebrity-performative exposure most artists nowadays are pressured to engage into in order to keep their fanbase as well as to stay relevant for the public eye. Therefore, it is crucially important to analyze the use of the symbols of love and feeding in social networking platforms such as *Instagram*, which is predominantly a visual medium, in the sense that images are employed in order to create a closed circuit of visual information. The circulation of this type of information is produced by the creation of affectivity bounds that constantly feeds our need for this kind of stimulation. This is the reason why is interesting to understand how the dichotomy established between to be liked and not to be liked affects the manner in which online success and acceptability work intrinsically together. The subjectivized body has been transformed into a product for virtual consumption, in the same manner that Zoë Sofia conceptualized what Haraway later named *techno-digestion*:

The poetics of high-technology culture proceeds via devices which scope and scoop at the world, and technologies of transport, communication, and information which together allow the object to be constructed and separated from its appearance, and the source to be hollowed out into re-source. Along with those organizational and topographical strategies which allow the Earth to be cannibalized at a distance, these devices of space and time travel provide the temporary illusion of scape from the bad side-effects of high-tech production. (Sofia 1985, 48)

I would like to explore in more depth the erotics of food ingestion in a poem by Sarah Jean Alexander, “Isidoro”¹¹³ (*Wildlives*, 2015). The title of the poem itself refers to the name of an Italian restaurant, located in the city center of Rome, close to the Colosseum. It is advertises as the most romantic place in the city to try Italian classical cuisine. Starting in the third stanza, the speaker’s

¹¹² Sunmi’s *Noir* (2019) videoclip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNeNwplE_aw&list=RD_3T8KznhThQ&index=16

¹¹³ The complete poem can be found in Appendix 2, page 297.



SHOWRY'S MAKING FRUIT JUICE (2015)

waiting is transformed into a longing for food, which can be interpreted as a desire for the other person sexually speaking: “where I am waiting / with my mouth open.” (Alexander 2015, 73) The image of a “mouth open” suggests strongly sexually imagery in relation to oral sex, apart from expressing a need for eating or to be fed. In Chapter 3, section 3.2.2., I discussed in greater detail another of Alexander’s poem, “Challenge” (*Wildlives*, 2015) in whose analysis I employed Klein’s concept of *introjection*, where the mouth becomes a metaphoric channel for incorporating external objects to form part of the internal ones, in the same manner food is processed through breast-feeding. Also, concerning the parallelism between feeding and the ego’s development, I commented on the social media Korean phenomenon *mukbang*, which is the *live* broadcasting of eating online. But this particular case, I would like to emphasize the dynamics of eroticism of this practice in conjunction with the image presented at the poem. These possible sexual connotations are relevant for the reading of the next passage: “You can put a number of things inside of me including – but not limited to – ...” (Alexander 2015, 73), then a list of food and other items are introduced randomly in connection to the Italian restaurant situation and her sexual oral fantasies.

In some way, Alexander depicts a grotesque attitude towards sexual orality and food similar to Korean online shock-comedian Showry, whose videos parodies the disturbing sexual connotations that *mukbang* shows often display. Showry originally started in *Afreeca TV*, the platform that popularized *mukbang* in the first place, but after some criticism by online users, she moved her satiric video-performance to the internationally popular *YouTube*, where her “Making

Fruit Juice” (2015) video hit more than a million views ¹¹⁴. Her overtly bizarre pornographic gestures and the grossly use of food have become her personal trait mark by challenging people’s views on Asian women as well as disturbing and amusing the online public equally. Showry’s take on food porn is just a Millennial version in the form of comedy about the erotization of the female body at the expenses of visual pleasure. There is a sense of transgression, a fantasy of challenging normative food consumption at the same time of “sexually objectifying the female body and reinforcing the normative values of thinness and consumerism” (Schwegler-Castañer 2018, 784), by also contributing to create an intimate bound recreated by food indulgence.

The most relevant line from Alexander’s poem in the orally performative consumption of stuff is implied in the image of “your fingers” (Alexander 2015, 73), which suggests the licking of fingers for tasting sauce leftover on them or for sexual masturbation or a fellatio since “inside of me” can be interpreted as ambiguous metaphor for the mouth as stomach or the mouth as the vagina where he inserts his fingers on, especially when the metaphor of the “ocean water” can be seen as a symbol for female arousal, as if she was getting wet from sexual excitation or stimulation. Not to mention that visualizing “fingers” introduced into a “mouth open” (Alexander 2015, 73) connects to Mira



TAMPOPO BY JUZO ITAMI (1985)

Gonzalez’s poem “when I die you can have my heart-shaped sunglasses”¹¹⁵ (*I will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together*, 2013) and its explicitly sexual imagery also found in current pop culture. The alternation of food items with random ones contributes to this ambiguity. Also, it



9 1/2 WEEKS BY ADRIAN LYNE (1986)

is interesting to analyze that shiraz is a variety of grape and also the name of a city in Iran, widely known as the city of poets, literature, wine and flowers, which contributes to this game of multiple meaning references. The image of women’s mouth have been *pornified* by using binge eating at various relatively recent movies’ scenes: the bizarre egg yolk exchange between lovers in Japanese Western comedy

Tampopo by Juzo Itami (1985)¹¹⁶, which has been recently recreated by German director Francisco

¹¹⁴ Showry’s “Making Fruit Juice” YouTube video (2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zhe-as5SFg0>

¹¹⁵ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 323](#).

¹¹⁶ *Tampopo*’s egg scene (1985): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqA-mP0MhZg>

Sendino (2019)¹¹⁷; famous food scene with Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke in Adrian Lyne's erotic melodrama *9 1/2 Weeks* (1986)¹¹⁸; or the disturbing banana eating in Lyne's adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1997)¹¹⁹. Now that I have widely commented on the relevance of various images related to pornographic depictions of oral sex and erotic consumption, I would like to continue analyzing the symbolic relevance of fingers and the representation of masturbatory practices in *Alt [C]Lit* poetry to further the discussion about the body combined with other online-related practices.



LOLITA BY ADRIAN LYNE (1997)

4.2.2. Down the bunny's (w)hole: w3t-fing3ring of poetry

Masturbation is a well-known form of solitary sex: any gender, any sex, and any sexual identity have practiced it, actively or passively, at some point of their lives, to a major or less extent. It is a form for self-exploration through touching, which is not only constrained to the stimulation of the genitals, but it also involves other kinds of physical contact with other parts of the body, whether these ones are overtly sexualized, such as the breasts or the anus, or are rather sensual, like all our skin, hands' palms, the inner part of our thighs, the back of the neck and our feet's fingers. As it happens in Bess' "IF INSTEAD OF ASKING ME TO INSTALL UPDATES AND RESTART MY COMPUTER I WAS ASKED IF I WANTED TO DIE INSTANTANEOUSLY I WOULD PROBABLY CLICK YES INSTEAD OF NOT NOW"¹²⁰ (*Alone With Other People*, 2013), an occasional cure for sadness and loneliness. The title of the poem should be analyzed by itself, because it is a clear allusion to Internet culture. The joke originates from the alert questions on "updates" of the computer's programs, typically associated to modern versions of Windows (asking permission to users, which is one of the ways technology interacts directly to users). Bess changes these questions to the "to die instantaneously" but still keeps the probable answers, "yes" and "not now" (meaning later). This long title provides a dramatic effect as well as it emphasizes a sense of defeat and sadness disguised under the appearance of sarcasm. But the rest of the poem apparently does not have' anything to do with this depressing tone:

¹¹⁷ Sendino's remake (2019): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pi3TbVPdeAI>

¹¹⁸ *9 1/2 Weeks*' finger food scene (1986): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E9aknVGp6g>

¹¹⁹ *Lolita*'s banana scene (1997): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uu5JmYD5lgs>

¹²⁰ The poem complete can be found in Appendix 2, 301.

When I am sad, I masturbate.

It feels pathetic for about 10 minutes and OK for about 30 seconds. (Bess 2013, 79)

The poetic voice emphasizes how masturbating have similar effects on her that alcohol has for other people in order to drink her sorrows away: the first moments you are still conscious of what you are doing you feel sorry for yourself, but after reaching a point of unconsciousness it makes you feel better, that is the orgasm itself. She excuses herself like addict blaming her weakness and shame on love: "Not because of the sensations but / because my hand is in my pants and I am pretending / it's your hand" (Bess 2013, 79) The poem acquires a confessional tone as she expresses her longing for a recent former relationship: the feelings of shame and poignancy are obvious since she fantasizes that her own hand is his actual hand masturbating her again, as she hides in the dark of her room, not to be seen. This is confirmed in the following lines:

Then there is the guilt of wanting you
but only reaching an orgasm when I watch the tiny,
naked people on my laptop

Then there is just the volume. The awful volume of
forced guttural noises
and happiness even on the lowest volume setting

But I need the noises to make it feel real, or perhaps,
transparently fake (Bess 2013, 79)

These lines suggest that in order to get over her guilt and shame, she uses online porn to get enough stimulus to masturbate without thinking about it, or even missing sex in company of a real person: the images just become sounds, since from a psychological perspective, women are more sexually stimulated by sounds rather than by images. Also, by closing the eyes, one can imagine that those sounds belong to another person, probably a known one, rather than from a porn movie. Abruptly, she makes a sudden confession: "I feel like I'm developing (if not already developed) a / crippling porn addiction." (Bess 2013, 79) But, is she really developing an addiction to porn itself, or rather to the whole ritual of masturbating while watching porn in order to fantasize about a former lover? The answer to this question seems to be found later in the poem:

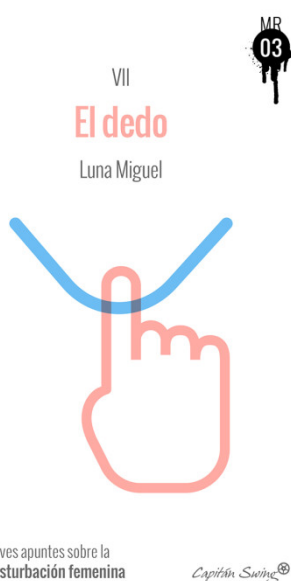
I enjoy the whole orchestra of it: The guilt of missing you
with the nice feeling between my legs with the orb of
light and high-pitched noises emanating from my laptop (Bess 2013, 80)

Instead of feeling depressed about her loss, she enjoys the fact of not having it anymore, since she is triggered by arousal and lack of feeling: just plain and cold-blooded sex. Afterwards,

she describes a fantasy about being able to have sex without emotions being implied: “In the / future, machines will replace humans that I’ve loved and / most other things.” (Bess 2013, 80) This fantasy reminds of the actual reality already experienced in Japan, where technology and robots are substituting human relationships, because people are becoming scared of the consequences of breaking up or due the emotional demands of her potential partners, including financial and prospective marriage duties. Sexbots and virtual girlfriends are starting to substitute potential human partners, and are especially very popular among the male population. This fact also shows up an inherent misogyny in heterosexual relationships and the cisnormative expectations on platonic or romantic love in culture. This is starting to catch up in Western culture, where virtual reality sex and porn are becoming the next targets in the sex industry. Therefore, the poetic voice of Bess’ poem fantasizes about this hybridization and intimate connection between sex and technology by suggesting that she is turning into a kind of cyborg or hybrid entity, between half human and half virtual:

In the two years that you’ve been gone I have become an
extremely advanced human/MacBook/xvideos.com
hybrid. This will prove to be an advantage, in the future. (Bess 2013, 80)

In some sense, technology has become a relief for this voice in order to enjoy sex, without having the emotional involvement it requires. But still, she cannot avoid the other person's ghostly memory haunting her whenever she fingers herself and reaches the orgasm. Spanish poet Luna



EL DEDO BY LUNA MIGUEL (2016)

Miguel dedicated a collection of essays about her personal experiences and reflections on female masturbation in *El Dedo* (2016), *The Finger* in English. The suggestive yet simple cover of the book depicts a down-curved blue line that resembles a vulva with a juxtaposed index-pointing finger that perfectly fits inside the imaginary vagina, resembling a *fingering* act. There, she narrates how female sexuality is repressed from a very young age through mockery and belittlement, by using the diminutive form of “dedillo” (“little finger” in English), in order to dismiss this sexual practice of self-pleasure for girls as “something that should be done secretly” o “a joke about girls’ genitalia” (Miguel 2016, 6), something that the author describes as part of her childhood memories. Germaine Greer describes in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) the same attitude that results into self-repression, even

disgust, towards one’s own female anatomy: “The little girl is not encouraged to explore her own

genitals or to identify the tissues of which they are composed, or to understand the mechanism of lubrication and erection.” (Greer 2012, 44) Miguel points out towards the assimilation of a radical sexual dichotomy during early childhood that is strongly based on differentiated cisgendered roles:

[...] a wank was a synonym of forcefulness, of attitude, of pleasure. It was impossible to think that jerking off and fingering formed part of the same act: the first one could be reclaimed, whereas the second should always remain hidden.” (Miguel 2016, 6)

The secrecy associated to women’s masturbation has to do with stigma and taboo: the dangers of Lilith discovering and acknowledging self-pleasure and rebelling against Adam as the only provider of sexual drives. Solitary sex is also outside the instrumentalization of sexuality for procreation, which is a very Catholic sin: the enjoyment of the flesh for neither sexual reproduction nor interaction with a monogamous cispartner. American creator and director Karen Maine fictionalizes her



YES, GOD, YES BY KAREN MAINE (2019)

experiences as a teen student of a Catholic institution in *Yes, God, Yes* (2019)¹²¹, a short movie that depicts a girl’s journey through sexual repression and sexual awakening: this title echoes the community-based platform that advocates for women’s self-exploration and open public discussion about pleasure and sexual enjoyment *OMGYES*¹²², which has been running since 2016.

Alt [C]Lit poet Ana Carrete perfectly summarizes up the conflict between guilt and pleasure growing up as a Chicana Catholic girl in her poem “freudian clit”¹²³ (*Baby Babe*, 2012), whose title is inspired by Freud’s views on female sexual development in his canonical *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), where he claimed that sexual maturation in women happened “when the erotogenic susceptibility to stimulation has been successfully transferred by a woman from the clitoris to the vaginal orifice” (Freud 1967, 87), suggesting that clitoral stimulation is connected to “micturition” and the “secretions which may give an early start to sexual excitation” when children urinate (Freud 1967, 53). The infantilization of the clitoris that Freud illustrates is associated only to



CARRETE 33, 2012.

¹²¹ *Yes, God, Yes* (2019) full movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7mS5JB0SEg&t=3s>

¹²² *OMGYES* webpage: <https://www.omgyes.com/en/about#/>

¹²³ The complete poem can be found in *Appendix 2*, page 313.

girls' sexual masturbation rather than the vaginal one: according to him, this urge for self-penetration is manifested later in life, when a woman pursues sexual intercourse. Therefore, penetration was conceived as the only way for a women' sexual pleasure to be considered normal, and hence accepted. This prejudice has contributed to underestimate the clitoris' importance in female orgasm from a socio-cultural, as well as scientific, understanding of women's sexuality. Carrete illustrates this sense of guilt around feeling pleasure by using the word "stress" to refer to an orgasm that has been repressed: "[it] is the product of not being allowed / to feel okay / while



ILANA'S MASTURBATION SESSION IN *BROAD CITY*
(SEASON 2, EPISODE 8, 2015)

being honest" (Carrete 2012, 31) It is interesting to pay attention of the words "allowed" and "being honest" as ways to refer to accept female arousal and feelings of pleasure as a natural expression of their sexuality without being associated to a procreative means. This is an illustration from *Baby Babe* that can be connected to the message of this poem in relation to her upbringing: a Christian cross made up with

dots in which the word "cochina", which means "dirty" or "perverted" in Spanish, is inscribed as a reminder of this religious denial of sexual autonomy for women in particular.

Nowadays the representation of female sexuality in media has increased and even improved over the years, especially since a growing number of them are created by and for women themselves. Millennials have been able to produce and have access to a variety of visual content that has never been seen before. Women masturbated in TV shows, which most of the times are also displayed and visualized through online platforms, can be watched in a non-pornified gaze in ground-breaking and classical *Sex and the City* (Candace Bushnell, 1998), and more contemporary ones like *HBO Girls* (Lena Dunham, 2012), *Broad City* (Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, 2014), *Fleabag* (Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 2016), *Big Mouth* (Jennifer Flackett, 2017), and more recently *Sex Education* (Laurie Nunn, 2019). In these series, we can watch different depictions of women engaging in diverse sexual acts, including masturbation, and talking freely, and unashamedly, about sex in general, always with a touch of humor: from Ilana's masturbating ritual-session in *Broad City* (Season 2, Episode 8 2015)¹²⁴, to the surrealistic scene in which Jessie learns how to have an orgasm instructed by her own vagina and her hormone *monstress* Connie in *Big Mouth* (Season 3, Episode 6, 2017). All these representations have actively contributed to erase stigma and to normalize a more standardized and unapologetic vision on women's solo sex. As Miguel writes in

¹²⁴ *Broad City*'s scene "Ilana gets in the mood" (2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB9tVIFdu6s>

her essay, touching herself helped her to understand that she was a desiring being that needed to feel that liberating electric feeling that was coming out from that part of her body, that to be found in her vagina, a form to connect at an intimate level with her body: “If I wanted to really masturbate, to really experience, to feel all the electricity that during my childhood I have been experiencing without effort, the next step was to sticking my hand out, pointing my finger up and starting to delve inside there.” (Miguel 2016, 8) This passage directly re-connects the reader with the image that is displayed in the cover of the same book, which symbolizes the juncture between bodily pleasure and women’s creativity. Even confessional poet Anne Sexton dedicated a whole poem, “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator” (1981), as an ode to solitary love and women’s sexual agency through fingering themselves:

[...]

At night, alone, I marry the bed.

Finger to finger, now she’s mine.

She’s not too far. She’s my encounter.

I beat her like a bell. [...] (Sexton, *Poetry Foundation*)

If for Sexton “beat(ing) her like a bell” (Sexton, *Poetry Foundation*) was a form of referring to the click(ing) of the clit. Also, the emphasis that Sexton puts in the line “at night, alone, I marry the bed” (Sexton, *Poetry Foundation*), which is repeated throughout the poem, makes it more explicit that the most common site for practicing solitary self-pleasure is the bed that is inside of one’s rooms: if Zafra claimed that the material site from which we normally connect to the Internet is “[...] a prolongation of the screen” where “work and rest, public and private life flow together in the connected room of one’s own” (Zafra 2010, 27). I would like to take a step further in this respect and claim that is not the room, but the bed the site for these prolongations, as I have already briefly commented at previous various sections of the present Thesis. The images of Carrete, Gonzalez, Alexander and Bess sitting in front their computers, taking pictures of themselves in front



JESSIE LEARNS HOW TO MASTURBATE IN *BIG MOUTH* (SEASON 3, EPISODE 6, 2017)



NM RLY WBU BY POLLY NOR (2015)



HUGH HEFNER'S *PLAYBOY* ROTATING BED 1966.

of their webcams shows up this intimate mediation between the subject, the bed and the computer as the symbolic image of Millennials: the bored existentialism happens while we are on our computers lying on our beds. Preciado already pointed to this possibility in the long essay *Pornotopia* (2010), where he analyzed the implications of the *Playboy* bed as a “multimedia prothesis”, which “provides access to control the environment and pleasure through the image” (Preciado 2013, 175), behaves in a similar way to the Millennial bed that Polly Nor depicts in the illustration “Nm Rly Wbu” (2015). The main difference of both realities relies in the fact that the *Playboy* bed is a mediated prolongation of “heterosexual masculinity” (Preciado 2013, 175) whereas Nor’s Millennial bed is a less luxurious and powerful interface of burnout precariousness. What connects both beds seem to be its relation to the connection that is established between the inside of the room to the external world, as it is explained in the following passage:

The rotating bed works like a famarcopornographic multimedia prothesis in which the playboy [...] connects to. This multimedia connection is the one that allows to get in touch with the external world, without thereby being encapsulated, simultaneously transforming his passivity into sexuality and business, into pleasure and work. (Preciado 2013, 180)

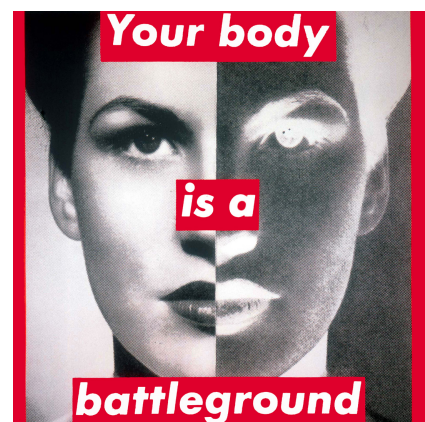
Going back to sexuality repression and its connection to masturbating experiences in girls and young women, Carrete also continues to explore her own sexuality through childhood memories by depicting doll-gameplay in “dolls don’t have pussies”¹²⁵ (*make-believe love-making*, 2011), where she depicts her masturbatory fantasies by employing the body of a “barbie-ish” (Carrete 2012, 22) for such task. What is interesting to note is the sexual violence depicted in the line “but no one is moaning / and i stab her with candy cane” (Carrete 2012, 22), in which the poetic voice uses “stab(bing)” as a synonym for penetrating as it happens in the sexual act. But apparently, intercourse is impossible because “dolls don’t have pussies” (Carrete 2012, 22), a statement that can be found at the title of poem as well as inside the fifth stanza. Also, it is followed by a warning to the reader, or to a particular unknown “you”, about not comparing her to a “doll”: “so don’t you ever / call me doll again” (Carrete 2012, 22). The infantilization and the objectification implied in the use of “doll” to refer to women operates in the same way the “doll” behaves in the poem: numb, passive, motionless, silenced, emphasized in the lines “but nothing happens”, “but no one is moaning”, or “but there’s no moaning” (Carrete 2012, 22) Then, the situation gets heated up, like the poetic voice’s rage:

[...]
i look for sharp shit in my backpack
and bang her locked pussy
repeatedly

she has a hole now
but there’s no moaning

i scream all the sexist things
everyone has ever said to me
[...] (Carrete 2012, 23)

The poetic voice transitions from “stab(bing) towards “bang(ing) her locked pussy / repeatedly” (Carrete 2012, 23) expresses her frustration and a liberated rage, which is confirmed “i scream all the sexist things / everyone has ever said to me” (Carrete 2012, 23): by creating a “hole” in the doll’s “locked pussy”, Carrete makes a powerful statement about female bodies, identity and sexual violence: how embedded is sexism to our learning processes and the way we project this toxicity towards the other(s). In some way, violence is a learnt behavior in the way one employs it by reproducing the same patterns which are



**YOUR BODY IS A BATTLEGROUND BY
BARBARA KRUGER (1989)**

¹²⁵ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 313](#).

repeated by those ones we interact with in our closest and nearest surroundings. This is what Carole Vance reflects in her essay “Pleasure and danger”, in the way women’s emancipation in terms of sexuality is trapped in the paradox of pleasing and feeling pleasure in a system that systematically denies her sexual agency and forces her to any kind of sexual violence or denigration:

The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women’s live. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live. (Vance 1992, 1)

Nowadays, the vagina, as more than a mere reproductive organ responsible to creating babies, is conceived more as a site for re-thinking female sexuality and its public representations in art and culture broadly. In a highly hyper sexualized society, if the body of women is still a “battleground”, just like Barbara Kruger’s powerful poster from 1989, now feminist artists’ daily warfare is all about vulvas, vaginas and female self-love and pleasure. Being denied by mainstream pornography a place where to find representative and realistic depictions from which to learn to accept our individual uniqueness and bond through acceptance of variety, many artists and activist have found their gateway through the Internet and its multiple social platforms, particularly those that employ visual media. In 2015, artist Marilyn Minter compiled a series of photographs whose



PLUSH BY MARILYN MINTER (2015)

major focus was displaying women’s pubic hair in *Plush*¹²⁶ as an attempt to illustrate the natural

¹²⁶ Marilyn Minter’s *Plush* (2015): <http://www.marilynminter.net/project/plush/>

beauty of women’s unshaved genitalia, and particularly focusing on women enjoying the experience of touching their pubic hair. Another example of online art that depicts vulvas, and more concretely, mostly female masturbation is performed through the videos and photographs created by multimedia artist Stephanie Sarley. She broke the Internet in 2015 by posting her first, and now world-famous, “fruit-fingering” video¹²⁷, where she masturbated a grapefruit at her *Instagram*¹²⁸ account, which has also resulted into being censored many times by the platform for being explicitly suggestive. Like we have already



FRUIT FINGERING BY STEPHANIE SARLEY.

seen at the previous section, sexualizing food as a means to portray sexual acts is not only a strategy employed by mainstream artists and creators in popular culture, but it also has been embedded in conceptual art. Carole Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (1964)¹²⁹ or Cindy Sherman’s disturbing food



GARBAGE SERIES BY CINDY SHERMAN

garbage series, like the one in which a penis-dildo is covered by a mix of sausages, ketchup, mustard and other stuff. The combination between sex and food seems to remind us that both oral and sexual fixations are interchangeably bringing us back to our primal needs. A need to be dirty and wild, outside the constraints of what is morally accepted, like it happens in Carrete’s masturbatory poem “i try to erase the trash with filthy words”¹³⁰ (*make-love make-believe* 2011). This time, the rage of the poetic-voice is channeled in a different manner: by verbal

violence, “filthy words” or by “scream(ing) obscenities” (Carrete 2011, 24). Again, violence leads to desire, as it is well expressed in:

she still cares
a little
that’s why she hides
her hands in her panties

when she’s alone (Carrete 2011, 24)

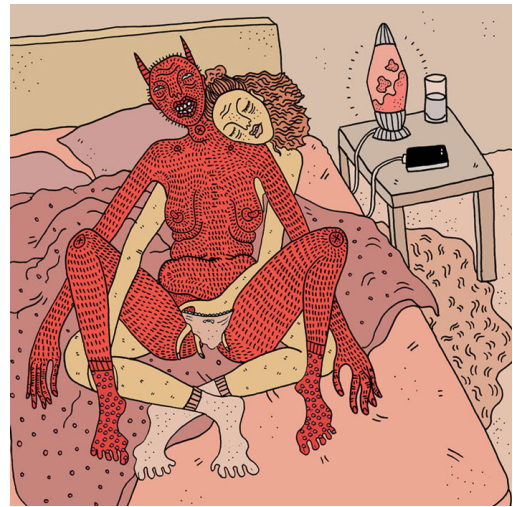
¹²⁷ Stephanie Sarley’s first “fruit-fingering” *Instagram* video-post: https://www.instagram.com/p/_0bevMpCvQ/

¹²⁸ Stephanie Sarley’s *Instagram* account: https://www.instagram.com/stephanie_sarley/?hl=es

¹²⁹ Carolee Schneemann’s *Meat Joy* (1964) recorded performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLFNrMOvFro>

¹³⁰ The complete poem can be found in *Appendix 2*, page 315.

Again, all her frustration and anger is transformed into pleasure by providing herself some solitary sex, touching herself in the absence, and the longing, of the other one. Also, the image of “hid(ing) her hands in her panties / when she’s alone” (Carrete 2011, 24) refers to hide her “car(ing)” about the other person: in other words, she hides her desire for the other person inside her masturbatory fantasies instead of confronting the other person with her true feelings, which also are hidden behind her hostility and rage. This paradox can be also seen represented in illustrator Polly Nor’s works, in which she usually depicts her characters’ alter egos as a female red-demons who dress up as normal women as if they were their outfits. In “The Devil Wears Nada” (2015),



THE DEVIL WEARS NADA BY POLLY NOR
(2015)

Nor depicts a pair of women, one of them in her red-demon appearance who is masturbated by the other one. In relation to Carrete’s poem, one can compare both works in the way masturbation is depicted as physical bonding that transcends the bodily experience: it can transcend anger, solitude, and even sadness, momentarily, and reconnect one to her own bodily presences. As the feminist

collective of activists and artists *VNS Matrix* claim in “The Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st century” (1991): “The clitoris is a direct link to the matrix” (VNS Matrix, 1991) By masturbating, women click their clitoris and connects them to the matrix. The matrix is understood as a set of numbers which are arranged in rows and columns representing data, employed in computing sciences for generating approximations of complicated operations. No wonder the clothing brand *Badass Prints* released a collection with this rhyming couplet as a way to generate more visibility and public acceptance of female masturbation. As Laura Bey at her artistic work *La vida en la*



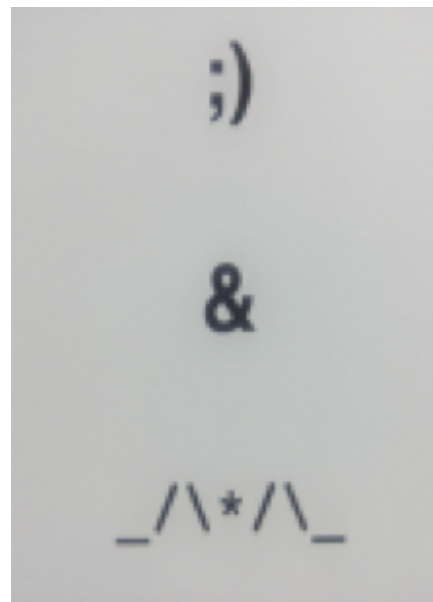
‘CLICK MY CLIT’ BY BADASS PRINTS

primera IP (2010), in English *My life in the first IP*: “Fucking finger. The more I click the more messages circulate and the more obligations I have.” (Bey 2010) This parallelism between clicking and fingering, as used for interacting with the virtual interfaces of our mobile phones or computers as well as for masturbating, re-directs us towards the following brief poem by Carrete, “winking vagina”¹³¹ (*Baby Babe*, 2012), which follows like this:

¹³¹ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 315](#).

a penis comes and clicks my vagina
 did you believe that i made that up
 i mean i made it go up
 i made a boner with my naked hands (Carrete 2012, 86)

The content of the poem and the image that appears next to the text are both sexually explicit and mutually symbolic. The image tries to emulate a hieroglyph that alludes to the title in a literal sense. The winking face represented there is made up with the symbols of a keyboard which are a semicolon as the eyes winking, and a bracket as a smiling mouth. The second image under, two underscores as the feet spread open to the outside, four slashes forming two legs bending and the asterisk representing the vagina itself: this is the representation of a woman lying down with her legs spread open, inciting the viewer, waiting for a sexual encounter. Concerning the content of the text itself, the poetic voice seems to recreate a sexual encounter that is happening virtually: a penis “clicks” her vagina, as the cursor of a computer screen, as if the act of clicking would stand for the actual sexual action of penetrating.



CARRETE 86, 2012.

The use of the expression “i made that up” (Carrete, 2012, 86) can be interpreted in two possible ways because of the ambiguity of the context provided: firstly, meaning could be to reconcile two people, whereas the second one is related to inventing something. The next lines turn out to be an attempt to clarify the other ones produced previously, by transforming the meaning of “made [...] up” (Carrete 2012, 86). In the following line, “that” is substituted by “the penis” and in the next one, it is referred to it as “i made it go up” (Carrete 2012, 86). Then, the last line “i made a boner with my naked hands” (Carrete 2012, 86) can be interpreted as an allusion to performing a hand job or to masturbate, as well as to make a mistake: it can even mean both at the same time. Since the interpretation of the poem is left open to the reader for its richness of possible meanings, humor is key to understand the ambiguity in Carrete’s poetry. Therefore, in the following and last section, I will explore in further detail the link between virtuality and diverse moods of affectivity in relation to sexuality and femininity.

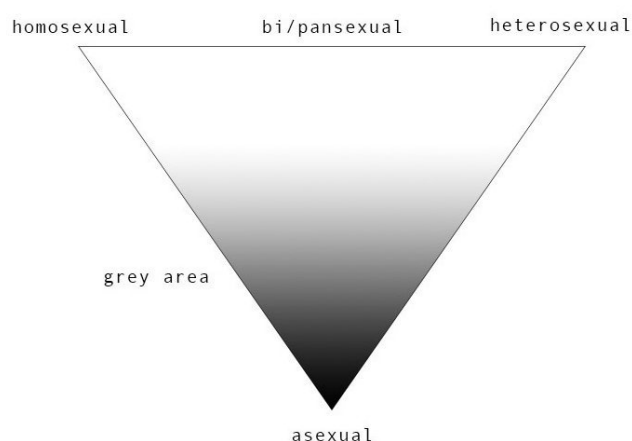
4.2.3. C(v)nting D0vvn the Cyberw0rld: the [Fe]male as (On)Line *Voyeur*

As we have already seen at the previous section, the constant allusions to the female genitalia and its representation in contemporary women's art, both visual and textual is the site for reclaiming visibility, creating awareness, and encouraging political activism. With this in mind I would like to read Ana Carrete, "my sex is an upside down triangle"¹³² (*Baby Babe*, 2012). The poem comes along with a connected image that represents the female genitalia as an inverted triangle, which is shown below:

[...]
 we buy things and fuck
 we fuck and buy things
 whenever i'm single
 my sex is the asexual triangle
 my sex is upside down (Carrete 2012, 104)

As one can easily deduce from the title of the poem, this is another of Carrete's examples in which text and image correlates in order to complete its meaning, or even suggest further symbolic possibilities of interpretation. The image, and a part of the poem itself, are references to the AVEN triangle, which stands as the symbol of asexuality, and each side has a meaning related to sexual identities: the top line stands for the Kinsey scale, which charts the level of an individual's sexuality over time; the left one represents homosexuality and the right one heterosexuality. The bottom line represents sexual attraction, at which point those asexual are represented.

In Carrete's image, there is the addition of a short vertical line at this ending point creating the illusion of a schematic vulva. On the other hand, the poem deals with sexual boredom, disappointment and dissatisfaction, by describing young Millennials routines and lifestyles, as it shows the references to "anime", Japanese animated cartoons of both children's and adult's content, and "youtube videos", whose contents, created by non-professionals, have become the exponent of new forms of entertainment, by substituting TV as a the most used platform for such purpose. There is also a constant reference to consumerism, and how this has become an intrinsic part to conceive the way we live in a highly capitalistic society like the one the USA actually is: sex, like any other ludic activity performed in



AVEN TRIANGLE SAMPLE

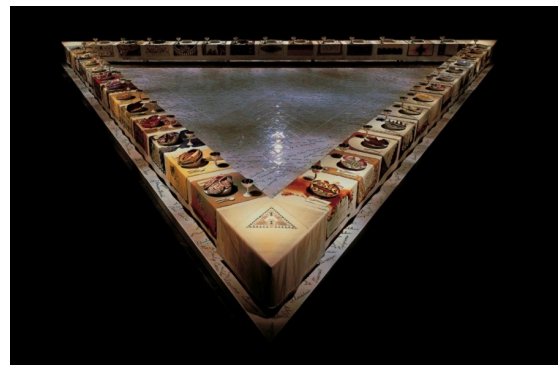
¹³² The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 315](#).



CARRETE 104, 2012.

the intimacy of our rooms, has become a product to be consumed in a similar way to other ones, like buying things in a mindless and emotionless way: this portraits a zombie-like, even (cyber)robotic attitude towards life. In this sense, becoming asexual symbolically embodies the boredom and numbness that many people, particularly youngsters, feel towards life in general. Asexuality is considered a sexual orientation that is characterized as a lack of interest on sex, as well as experiencing no sexual attraction despite the possibility of engaging into sexual acts anyways. Therefore, performing certain acts in our lives without producing any kind of satisfaction, just being done as daily routines or common duties, generates this dissatisfaction for the triviality of general exhausted existence.

In section 4.2.2., we have already seen that the clitoris stands as an important symbol for making more visible women's sexual emancipation and agency as center for expressing arousal, pleasure and desire from a feminine site. Now, in this section, the vulva becomes a symbol of chosen de-sexualization in a culture where women's bodies are constantly hyper sexualized through a cis-male gaze: the pornified lenses of a heteronormative mindset. In 1979, *The Dinner Party*¹³³ by Judy Chicago was exhibited as an installation of mixed media that pay tribute to 39 big names in women's Western history, distributed with their correspondent tablecloth and plates. Currently, it is curated as part of the permanent collection of the *Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art* at the *Brooklyn Museum*. The initial idea was to create an alternative *Last Supper* conformed "by those who have done the cooking", as in the behind scenes of cultural history. The triangular shape of the table's disposition reminds to the ancient symbol representing womanhood as a vulva: 999 additional names completes the space, interlacing each side of the triangle and conforming a continuous network throughout history. The use of plates in which butterfly-shaped vulvas as well as embroidered runners with feminine motifs contributes to reinforce this feminist vision on women's undermined historical relevance: a real feminist homage made up of traditional mixed media and symbols of femininity employed by women back in time when the textual was forbidden to them.



THE DINNER PARTY BY JUDY CHICAGO (1979)

¹³³ *The Dinner Party: A Tour Exhibition* video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yMtdWxAc60>

recollections and collaborations online. In 2013, the Australian performance artist Casey Jenkins started to knit from a yarn which was inserted in her vagina for 28 days, coinciding with the menstrual cycle duration. The purpose of her *Vaginal Knitting*¹³⁶, as she explains herself when



VAGINAL KNITTING BY CASEY JENKINS (2013)

asked about her project, was to feel more in contact with the creative processes involved in her bodily experience of being in touch with the materials of her knitting. And in 2018, the queer artist Janelle Monáe released the videoclip for her single *PYNK*¹³⁷, which is a clear celebration of the vulva with its astonishing and suggestive costumes and constant references to it as “pink” as part of a political statement: it can be read “pussy power” in one of the videoclip stills as neon lights. This revival of reclaiming the

female genitalia as a place of empowerment was already explicitly stated by feminist writer Inga Muscio in *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* in 1998, almost a more than two decades before feminist artists dare to use freely this vulva representation without getting censored. What Muscio called the “Cuntist Mystique” can be found in the following fragment:

Every girl and lady who is strong and fighting and powerful, who thrives in this world in a way that serves her, is a rockin’, cuntlovin’ babe doing her part to goad the postpatriarchal age into fruition. (Muscio 1998, 42)

Carrete has also gone a step further and has also reclaimed the word “cunt” in various poems, like the one “talk to the cunt”¹³⁸ (*Baby Babe*, 2012), where self sexual awareness is literally expressed in lines like “i ova impure thought every five seconds”, “my tongue turns into something sexy and wet” or “i think you can fill in the blanks” (Carrrete 2012, 138) The word “cunt” has a similar reputation to that one of “slut”, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. A derogatory term widely used to insult, offend and denigrate women’s bodies, creating a sense of shame and disgust about one’s own genitalia particularly. But the word “bitch” has become a new counter-stereotype opposite to feminine submissiveness and passivity and stand as a stance for empowerment, defiance, and self-love. As



PYNK BY JANELLE MONÁE (2018)

¹³⁶ *Vaginal Knitting* by Casey Jenkins (2013): https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=q6RZZf6HMzo&feature=emb_title

¹³⁷ Janelle Monae’s *PYNK* (2018): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaYvIVR_BEc

¹³⁸ The complete poem can be found in *Appendix 2*, page 316.

Greer points out in *The Female Eunuch*, women learn to hate their intimate parts, and hence, this leads to a distaste for anything that is potentially sexual and then develop into a generalized lack of self-esteem:

Part of the modesty about the female genitalia stems from actual distaste. The worst name anyone can be called is *cunt*. The best thing a cunt can be is small and unobtrusive: the anxiety about the bigness of the penis is only equally by anxiety about the smallness of the cunt. (Greer 2012, 44-45)

In other of Carrete's *cunt poems* we have another explicit one, "cunt me in"¹³⁹ (*Baby Babe*, 2012), the "cunt" imagery becomes exponentially stronger, and word-play comes into the scene in a more obvious manner. A visual evidence of this is the numerous illustrations that populate Carrete's works with the verbalization of the noun "cunt": this reinforces the fact that "cunt" is an active agent, a source of empowerment, a site for resilience and action. An example of this can be the image shown here that follows this poem. The scene described above is explicitly sexual. The "guava", a tropical fruit typical of Mexico and other countries in Central America and northern South America, that can be sweet or sour, may be referring to the taste of her mouth or her vulva, suggesting a scene of cunnilingus. This is confirmed by the sentence "you lick outside my heart" (Carrete 2012, 121), implying again the performance of oral sex on a vulva because of its similar shape to the heart, and its symbolic connection to feelings of love. The comparison between the women's vulva and a fruit is similar to how Maisie Cousins' photographic project *What Girls Are Made Of* (2013-2014)¹⁴⁰ portrays women's sensuality and sexuality by juxtaposing close-ups of diverse hairy and natural bodies surrounded by fruits, flowers and different fluid textures and colors: the hedonistic evocation of Cousins' images

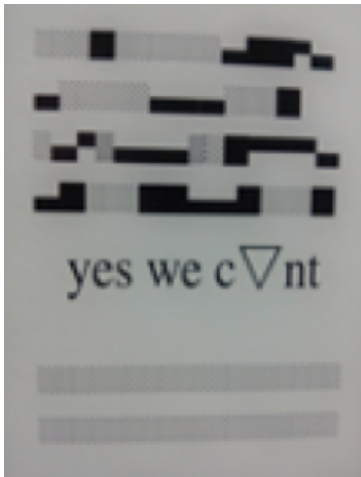


WHAT GIRLS ARE MADE OF BY MAISIE COUSINS (2013-2014)

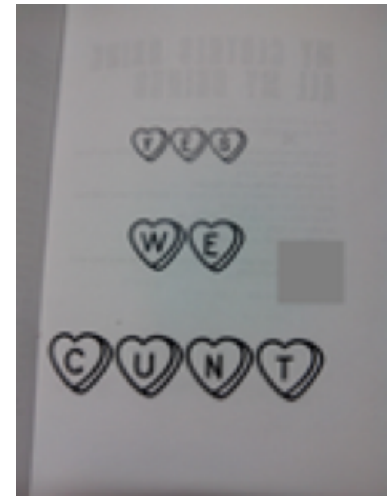
reminds of the fluids c(u)ming out of an aroused vagina, fleshy and soft, the sweet taste of fruity sex. The language used evokes the sexual tension created by the consummation of the sexual act because of its unfinished sentences and unconnected meaning, especially from the verse "it feels

¹³⁹ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 316](#).

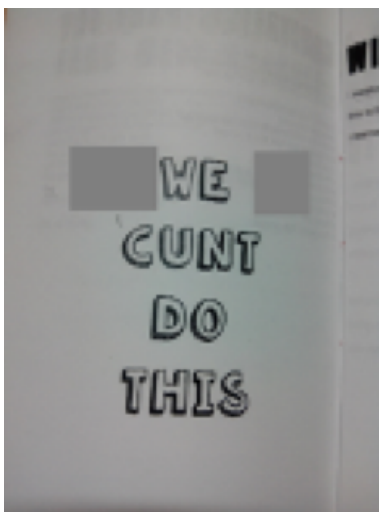
¹⁴⁰ Maisie Cousins' *What Girls Are Made of* (2013-2014): <http://www.seesawmagazine.com/cousinspages/cousinsintro.html>



CARRETE 129, 2012.



CARRETE 23, 2014.



CARRETE 10, 2014.

like you're about to" (Carrete 2012, 121) till the end. It gives the impression of recreating the conversation of two people have during sext(ing) who are too aroused to produce coherent utterances. There are two words in this poem that create a sense of ambiguity about the events recreated: "come/coming", and "cunt". "Coming" sound similar to "cumming", which means the exact point of reaching an orgasm. The line "how come" is the equivalent to

"why", but in this context we can interpret it as "how can i have an orgasm" (Carrete 2012, 121), which is a problematic issue for many

women sexually speaking. And for the last two lines "cunt me in" (Carrete 2012, 121), which is

repeated twice like a chorus or refrain: it could be an imperative meaning "fuck me" or "count me in", that is to include me in your activity or plan. In this sense, one can see an inverted triangle conforming the letter "u", which can be interpreted as the AVEN symbol or a vulva. In any of both cases, this triangle can be related to social vindications in relation to current gender politics in the USA, like the defense of women's and the LGBTQ community's rights, the vindication of governmental protection towards cases of rape, ensuring reproductive rights like abortion and the funding of planned parenthood services, as well as the legalization of same-sex partner's marriage. In *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), Eve Ensler

makes a beautiful defense of the use of the word "cunt" that slightly reminds of Nabokov's *Lolita*'s opening lines, and echoes Carrete's powerful "yes we cunt":

I call it cunt. I've reclaimed it, "cunt." I really like it. "Cunt." Listen to it. "Cunt." C C, Ca Ca. Cavern, cackle, clit, cute, come – closed c – closed inside, inside ca – then u – then cu – then curvy, inviting sharkskin u – uniform, under, up, urge, ugh, ugh, u – then n then cun – snug letters fitting perfectly together – n – nest, now, nexus, nice, nice, always depth, always round in uppercase, cun, cun – n a jagged wicked electrical pulse – n [high-pitched noise] then soft n – warm n – cun, cun, then t – then sharp certain tangy t – texture, take, tent, tight, tantalizing, tensing, taste, tendrils, time, tactile, tell me, tell me "Cunt cunt," say it, tell me "Cunt." "Cunt." (Ensler 2000, 101-102)

In the “WHY FI” poetry collection, we find two different images that plays with these words, evoking the famous political concession speech made by President Barack Obama when he won the Elections in 2008¹⁴¹. It is also related to a song of US rapper will.i.am inspired by the President’s speech, in which many US celebrities collaborated by appearing at the videoclip¹⁴². The



‘WE CAN DO IT!’ POSTER BY J. HOWARD MILLER (1943)

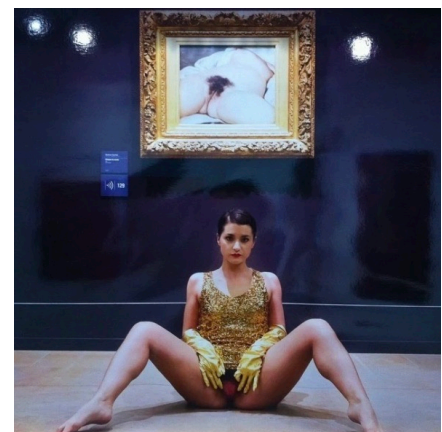
constant presence of the word “cunt” in different texts and images becomes a symbol for Carrete’s poems and main themes: the experience and vindication of being a woman and a poet. The slogan “We can do it!” originated during

the US wartime propaganda poster produced by J. Howard Miller in 1943 for *Westinghouse Electric*, in order to inspire women to work at factories during the Second World War. The poster is completed by a picture of a Michigan factory worker named Geraldine Hoff, whose image has become an emblem of feminism in the early 1980’s till today, popularly known as “Rosie the Riveter”, and promotes feminism and creates awareness about other political issues because of its emblematic message.

“Cunt” is a vulgar word used in informal contexts in order to refer to the vagina or the vulva. It can also be a derogatory and offensive term used to refer to a woman as a “whore” or a “bitch”. In contemporary history, one of the first challenging attempts to expose female genitalia explicitly was made by Gustave Coubert with his polemic *L’Origine du Monde* (*Origin of the World*) in 1866, and in 2014, performance artist Deborah de Robertis exposed her genitalia in front of the world-famous painting. She was arrested and expelled from the *Louvre Museum* accused of sexual exhibitionism. Other artists have



BARACK OBAMA’S YES WE CAN CAMPAIGN POSTER (2008)



DEBORAH DE ROBERTIS’ PERFORMANCE IN 2014.

¹⁴¹ Barack Obama’s 2008 Election Speech *Yes We Can*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mi8N5gDVpeg>

¹⁴² will.i.am’s *Yes We Can* (2008): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsV2O4fCgik>



MEGUMI IGARASHI'S VULVA REPRODUCTION.

recently faced censorship and even judicial prosecution due to the controversial explicitly visual content of their work. One of those examples is Japanese artist Megumi Igarashi created the manga character *Manko-Chan*, which means “Miss Pussy” in Japanese, as well as dioramas of her vulva which led towards her legal prosecution and trial for breaking Japanese Censorship Laws about the prohibition of genitalia representation¹⁴³. In Seville, the feminist activist performance of *Procesión del Santísimo Coño Insumiso* (which can be translated into English as the “Procession of the Sacred Rebellious Cunt”), whose purpose was to vindicate women’s rights and defend their role in society,



PROCESIÓN DEL SANTÍSIMO COÑO INSUMISO (2017)

were accused of offending religious feelings and public decency, and put their participants into trial for carrying a replica of a plastic vulva emulating the procession of the Virgin Mary. These are a few examples of what happens when art goes wrong due to taboo and censorship, specially concerning the treatment of female genitalia as part of pornographic display rather than a part of the anatomy that can potentially turn into a symbol for the political arena.

The political is the personal, and art can be the medium through which people can express this kind of statements, even in a humoristic way as Carrete does. She plays with the ambiguous phonetics of the word, so we can interpret by the sonority of the word that can be understood phonetically for other words, like it happens with “count” or “can(‘t)”, depending on the context it appears. This is what *VNS Matrix* stated in their manifesto at the closing lines: “We are the future cunt” (VNS Matrix 1991) This slogan resonates in a familiar way to the widely popular nowadays “The



VNS MATRIX MANIFESTO (1991)

¹⁴³ Documentary about Megumi Igarashi, *Vagina Art & the Paradox of Japanese Censorship Laws* (2015): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZYDGN4TPZU&feature=emb_title

Future is Female”, a political motto that has been recently used in New York’s 2017 Women’s March at Hillary Clinton’s speech. In 1975, the phrase was originally branded in a T-shirt used by



LABYRIS BOOKS T-SHIRT (1975)

Labyris Books, a radical feminist bookstore, and who has been released by design studio *Otherwild* in 2015. In Carrete’s poetry, we find this slogan re-created in “wiccan do this”¹⁴⁴ (*Why Fi*, 2014). Carrete plays again with the similar phonetics of the words “wiccan” to “we can”: /wikən/. The “sword” stands as an allusion to the penis that “cut”(s) her “in half”, representing the sexual act of performing oral sex: a classical pornographic fantasy of the phallic dominating-insertion over the woman’s holes of her body, reinforcing the active-male and

passive-female roles during sex as a sort of violent act between bodies. “Wiccan” is a follower of a well-known neopagan religion inspired by witchcraft and other ancient pagan cults, so that is why Carrete uses the image of sword-swallowing and refers to it as “magic trick” (Carrete 2014, 11). This image evokes the sexual act of “deep- throating” while performing oral sex, which is a clear reference to a pornographic practice originating from the well-known 1972 pornographic film *Deep Throat*.

Fantasies become virtual in “fuck you three dimensionally”¹⁴⁵ (*make-believe love-making*, 2011), where Carrete explores virtual sex as a new outcome of the resulting combination between telecommunication and the virtualization of social interaction into what Preciado refers to as “biosocial cyborg technology” (Preciado 2018,138) in *Countersexual Manifesto*. In here, Carrete makes a clear difference between the virtual and the material in the opening lines:

i’m fucking you
in my mind
and i know you
want to three dimensionally (Carrete 2011, 14)

The “mind” becomes the site from which the poetic voice departs in order to interact without directly referring to the body as a container’s entity. It is suggested that there is an opposition between two mediums: the virtual, which embodies the channel of communication, where these fantasies takes place through “untitled sex positions” and which hides a desperate longing for “want(ing) to three dimensionally” have sex (Carrete 2011, 14). It is necessary to point out that the expression “three dimensionally” originates from the mathematical representation of real objects

¹⁴⁴ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 316](#).

¹⁴⁵ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 317](#).

through computer graphics. A similar experience is depicted by Mira Gonzalez at the poem “I will inevitably ruin our relationship” (*i will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together*, 2013), in which the use of the expression of “virtual particles” (Gonzalez 2013, 31) in the context of the description of a casual sexual encounter reminds of that one Carrete illustrates at the poem mentioned before:

I closed my eyes and thought about virtual particles
that cease to exist when they are not observed
the momentum of a virtual particle is uncertain according to the
uncertainty principle
it is also uncertain whether or not I existed while I was kissing you (Gonzalez 2013, 31)

As we are previously induced to an interior perspective, in which we can perceive with greater detail how the narrator feels: “life was progressing against my perception of time / I had no idea how long I had been asleep” (Gonzalez 2013, 31) These lines describe a confusion and a series of mixed feelings about the shock provoked by the fact that her friend is kissing her, so she uses the metaphor of “virtual particles” in order to express her need for disconnecting her mind from her body, as a form of dissociation, in order to drastically scape from that awkward situation instead of confronting it by speaking up or rejecting him directly. The “virtual particles” can stand as an allegory for contemporary online existence, which is based on the principle of “being seen in order to exist”, as we have previously discussed at the first section of this very chapter. The poetic voice expresses her confusion as moment of uncertainty that makes her question her existence as she does not feel like an active participant of what her body is engaging into, clearly expressed in the line “it is also uncertain whether or not I existed while I was kissing you” (Gonzalez 2013, 31), which can be also interpreted as the need to break out of the situation through this process of dissociation. The rest of the poem just reinforces how the narrator doubts about her decision, which reinforces her pessimistic attitudes about how she will “inevitably ruin (their) relationship”, as it stated in the title, whatever she choses to do, whether rejecting him or hooking up with him too.

Melissa Broder takes a step further in her intriguing “Facsimile”¹⁴⁶ (from *Meat Heart*, 2012), as the word of title makes reference to a copy or reproduction of an old book, manuscript, map, art print, or any other item of historical value that is as true to the original source as much as possible: this basically means to replicate it as accurately as possible, so there is no apparent difference between both the original and the copy. Broder uses this term in order to express how

¹⁴⁶ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 308](#).

contemporary art, like photography, and many social media attempt to replicate human bodily presence as images or virtual presences, reproducing them through fictional space and real time. The facsimile becomes a metaphor of the paradoxical relationship that people have nowadays with their own body image projected into a virtual medium, and how this image circulates for visual pleasure and cognitive stimulation. The first stanza reminds one of the practices of cybersex, or better known as sexting, which is the act of sexually interacting through text messages. In the first line “How have you genitals?” (Broder 2012, 52), Broder jokes about the manner in which a form of sexting involves sending explicit images of the genitals in order to provoke sexual arousal, but she instead uses the performative role of hands in texting as a sexual fetish in the next lines:

It is enough
you have hands. Copy

your hands. Send them.
Triplicate, I'll open
my throat. (Broder 2012, 52)

The imagery depicted plays on how the instrumental use of “hands” also has a sexual role in our lives that can be transform into the object sexual for arousal, becoming instruments for sexual performance through writing, and obviously, masturbating: “hands” turn into the linguistic *phallus*, because we use them to write. This is also evident nowadays in the way that the eroticism of language works as a metaphoric performance of oral sex, as it is suggested in the line “I'll open my throat” (Broder 2012, 52): this is the erotics of ingestion that is mentioned at the beginning of this same section. Later on, the poetic voice makes a further move by trespassing the virtual boundaries that makes more evident their physical distance, and so she invokes him in its fleshly presence, a gesture that expresses her longing for the physical union which is represented through the written word at that moment: “I could make your golem from meat.” (Broder 2012, 52) The “golem” is an animated anthropomorphic being, magically created entirely from inanimate matter, that is also a profane, and inferior, imitation of the creation of Man by God out of clay, a mythical personification in the Jewish medieval folklore. In the poem, Broder fantasizes with the possibility of transforming her lover, from the virtual image into a *live* piece of meat, like a cyber Frankenstein creature created to bring her and others pleasure, including her neighbors who would be possible peeping upon their sexual encounters, as if they would be watching a porn film, “squirt(ing) and spy(ing)” (Broder 2012, 52). Then, the visions of that sexual encounter are depicted visually as screen-captures that emphasize the fragmentation of vision during the sexual act, like a pixalated version of a moment of

ecstasy, by losing control of what she is able discern between what to remember, to do or even to feel.

The need for having “hands” is now connected to the “too few fingers” which are not enough, and this image suggests a scene of masturbation, reinforced by the sense messy grime that is suggested at “so much cream.” (Broder 2012, 52) This sense of fluidity is reinforced in how the “skin” is affected by this “liquid”, making an explicit allusion to a wet vagina when aroused and to other bodily holes in the expression “slick slots” (Broder 2012, 52): these lines clearly point out to the level of excitement the poetic voice’s body is undergoing through as by means of fluids’ metaphor. The last closing lines are quite striking since it expresses a sort of dissatisfaction towards having this type of textual interactions with her virtual partner: “Stop writing poltergeist. Write bodies.” (Broder 2012, 52) In these lines, we have to pay special attention to the use of the word “poltergeist”, which refers to a type of ghost or other supernatural disembodied entity apparently responsible of physical disturbances, such as loud noises and objects being moved or destroyed without a natural explanation. Also, this phenomenon is supposedly capable of interacting with people by pinching, biting, hitting, and tripping them. In this sense, the speaker compares their distant relationship to a ghostly presence that she is only able to feel in certain ways, but not to the extent of having a fully materialized physical contact or a face-to-face interaction all together: his virtual presence makes her longing more for his body, by interacting with her five senses fully. Her need for the physical trespasses the linguistic realm, even though this is the only medium in order to produce the “bodies” she longs for through writing, through the material presence of the text, even if this one is virtual. As Cixous puts it in *The Laugh of Meduse* (1975) as an imperative for conceiving the body as a potential canvas for textual practices through which to find a voice for her longed *écriture féminine*:

Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she’s saying it with her body, because she doesn’t deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking. Her speech, even when “theoretical” or political, is never simple or linear or “objectified,” generalized: she draws her story into history. (Cixous 1976, 881)

As we have seen through these poets and their poems, the need to reclaim the body becomes a major focus through its multiple references to the female body as well as to diverse forms of sexual practices written in an explicitly bold manner that manifests this need for writing for, by and through the body as an embodied voice that inhabits the endless realms of the virtual in a disconnected and emotionally detached material existence.

Chapter 5. Between Danger(s) and Pleasure(s): The Polymorf(l)vx Cyber-Slut

Justice is about making sure that being polite is not the same thing as being quiet. In fact, often times, the most righteous thing you can do is shake the table. (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez at New York's Women's March, 18th January 2018)

Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another. (Toni Morrison, *Beloved* 2004, 112)

Throughout the history of humanity, bad women have populated the collective imagery in every culture and society that exists, or had existed, in this world. Focusing on the Western tradition, this duality between good and bad women has been used in order to define the limits of their sexual freedom to the constraints of patriarchal structures of family-reproduction. The figure of the bad woman in many folktales and popular stories has been employed as a cautionary narrative-device through which women must follow a certain set of moral values in order to preserve their integrity against the odds of male power and privilege, performed through various forms of physical violence against them. Among these forms of violence, rape constitutes one of the most prevalent ones, even nowadays, despite numerous efforts made by activists and governments to define the blurry line between consent and abuse, a line that transcends the political and intersects with the personal experience, in which the roles of abuser and victim collapses with the very notions of the self.

One of the most recent slurs to denominate a bad woman is the slut, a term whose use has been popularized among young people particularly. In this chapter, I'm going to discuss how the tropes of the virgin and the whore are represented in new ways in the poetry of Ana Carrete, Gabby Bess, Mira Gonzalez and Melissa Broder in order to depict the paradoxes of contemporary female sexuality and the violence and dangers associated to gendered and sexualized bodies under these socio-cultural dichotomies that still persist nowadays under different labels and conceptualizations that will be explored and analyzed critically next.

5.1. From Lilith to Kathleen Hana and Amber Rose: the (a)morality of the Sl*t's pleasure(s)

"The whore is porne, the lowest whore, the whore who belongs to all male citizens: the slut, the cunt." – 'Pornography: Men Possessing Women' by Andrea Dworkin

"If women were religiously (1981, 202)

Recognized sexually

We wouldn't have to feel the need to show our ass,

It's to feel free" 'SEX YEAH' by Marina and the Diamonds¹⁴⁷

The tale of the Bad Woman is as old as the world is. Mainly, she is defined by her sexual tendencies, which threatens the patriarchal structures of reproductive control over women's bodies. Promiscuity is the worst capital sin any considerate and decent woman should avoid falling into. The consequences transcend the punishment itself, becoming a stigma, the scarlet letter a woman must carry with for the rest of her life. In the Western Christian tradition, which goes back to the grotesque figure of Lilith, the first, and rebellious, wife of Adam according to the Babylonian Talmud (from the III to the V century B.C) who after negating herself to sexually submit to her man was expelled from Paradise to become a sexually-deprived demon who haunted men at night to steal their semen: since then, women's sexual agency has been considered a taboo. Other wicked women, paradoxically instigated due to their sexuality, such as Jezebel or Mary Magdalene, have been accused of witchcraft and prostitution by means of how their power as females threatened the established structures that men at that time held as their main privilege in the hierarchical structures of the heteropatriarchy. Because sex is not allowed for women. It must be only the way towards procreation, the only momentum in which women's bodies can be considered sexual for a good end. But this end is not even for herself: it is never for herself, in fact. Pleasure is amoral, particularly for a woman. Only *Shuts* feel it, because they have no moral: they do not submit to the feminine standards of social respectability.

Around 2012, Gabby Bess published a chapbook online titled *Black Dot Series*, in which a big black circle is inscribed with a word or a brief poem upon a white background, and with a brief description beneath it, usually related to the content of the black dot. Most of these short poems are related to sex and intimate relationships, in which the poetic voice expresses her sexual desires as well as a longing for other's affection: the boundaries



the slut word

¹⁴⁷Marina and the Diamonds' "SEX YEAH" (2012): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...>

between these two impulses are integrated without being able to discern them separately. There is one particular dot-poem that will introduce the topic that concerns this chapter. As it shows the image above, the poem consists of the word “sl*t” inside the black circle, and a subtitle in cursive that reads as “*the slut word*”: it seems that Bess expresses her sexual desires through the figure of the *Slut*, a slur usually thrown to women who are perceived socially as too sexual for what is considered to be ‘respectably’ average.

When one peeps throughout the Internet, we can have a clear picture of how a slut is perceived collectively. If anyone checks the definition online, we find different variations of the same concept: “promiscuous woman”, “who has many sexual partners”¹⁴⁸, “unclean or slovenly”¹⁴⁹, “impudent girl”, “dirty”, “lazy”, “low standards of cleanliness”, “many casual partners”, “sexual relationships with a lot of men without emotional involvement”¹⁵⁰, “sexually loose”, “immoral or dissolute”, “prostitute”¹⁵¹; these definitions belong to different English dictionaries in the net. But the more informal, and so more interesting from a sociological perspective, of all definitions, which can be found in online dictionary of slang *Urban Dictionary*, where people voluntarily collaborate with their own definitions in the same way *Wikipedia* does. What is interesting about this platform’s definitions is to see the popularity, or social acceptance, of the descriptions provided by the term in a rank displayed through the number of likes or dislikes, and as well as the use of examples in which the term might be used. These definitions show up more clearly the prejudices that constitute each idiom using tags, which keeps updated the way the term is used in relation to synonyms or the introduction of newer related words. These tags imply an accumulation of connotations that linguistically constitutes the word itself, especially those of new usage.

If one looks up at the *slut* entry¹⁵², that goes as “a disgrace to all women”, one can perceive the configuration of a contemporary myth which revolves around women’s sexual role and agency in hook-up culture, the tensions on the hypersexualization of their women’s attitude as a socially and still heavily gendered display of contradicting feminine attributes as well as racist and classist performative conflicts that intersect with reputation and morality in Western societies. For example, an entry from the *Urban Dictionary* defines *slut* as “a person that has promiscuous sex. Someone who sleeps around, not great for a relationship” (*Urban Dictionary* May 25th, 2018) When one

¹⁴⁸ *Cambridge English Dictionary*: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/slut>

¹⁴⁹ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/slut>

¹⁵⁰ *Cambridge English Dictionary*: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/slut>

¹⁵¹ *Wordreference Dictionary*: <http://www.wordreference.com/definition/slut>

¹⁵² Definition entries of the word “slut” at *Urban Dictionary*: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=slut>

scans throughout the next following definition-versions, one realizes that women's sexual liberation does not really exist yet. At least, in the practical sense. The definitions are linguistic explanations of a word, but rather discursive samples of rhetorical sexual shaming which still policies women's bodies and behavior patterns. The *Slut* is just the counterpart to the *Prude* just as the *Whore* opposes the *Madonna*: the same dichotomies that defines femininity in terms of good and evil are twisted and re-cons towards a paradoxical situation in which women do not want to label themselves in order not to be trapped by labels of promiscuity or sexual undesirability. As Greer claimed in the *Female Eunuch*, these words, such as *slut* or *whore* referring to an unconventional woman, off the limits, "are those which bear the weight of neurotic male disgust for illicit or casual sex." (Greer 2012, 296) As it still seems, a measured quantity of sexual performativity is expected from any potential partner, especially in heterosexual relationships. You must be a *slut*, at least behind the walls of intimacy of our rooms and to satisfy the pornographic exigencies and fantasies of the contemporary male, as an ironical proof of love.

5.1.1. Slut-Shaming: not qui(e)t(e) like a Virgin

According to a recent report made by the department of psychology from Auckland University of Technology, researchers Farvid, Braun and Rowney examined a group of 15 young women answers to an interview on their personal views and experiences on heterosexual casual sex and the sexual double standards about what a *slut* is for them. The article that collects all the data and conclusions resulting from this particular study, '*No girl wants to be called a slut!*', perfectly illustrates this contradictory problems that affect a young women's social relations as well as their sexual lives. The report concluded that "all 15 women in this study gave accounts of an agentic and desiring sexually yet talked about casual sex and a sexual reputation in contradictory and contested way." (Farvid, Braun & Rowney 2017, 544) A key element that the study finds in how a sexually liberated Western society still engages into women's repression of their sexuality is by the manner in which 'silencing' these casual sex experiences publicly contributed and affected in a positive or negative manner to their social and sexual reputation, reinforcing the double standard associated to the label *slut* in relation to the current perceptions on the performativity of female sexuality by others, even though the sexual agency and assertiveness of women is mostly accepted and is even expected:

[...] women's identity is enacted differently – there is no demand to talk about personal sexual experiences in the same way as men (particularly casual sex).

Traditional gender(ed) ideals demand silence in relation to women's casual sex experiences. This silence was indicative of subtle but present codes of what constitutes appropriate femininity, (sexual) behavior and talk. Based on a sexual double standard, it was directly linked to garnering a negative or tarnished sexual reputation (Farvid, Braun & Rowney 2017, 552)

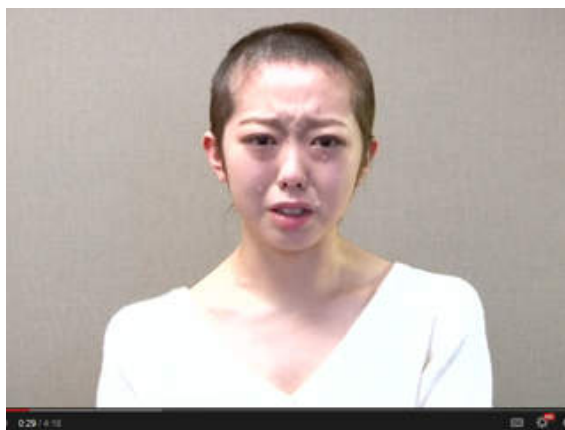
In *I am not a Slut*, Leora Tanenbaum dissects the implications of the use of this term among teenagers and young adults in the contemporary US socio-cultural context. Tanenbaum argues that the *slut* paradox derives from "[...] a modification of the virgin/whore dichotomy that has plagued women since the third millennium BCE, when the ancient Sumerians divided women into the categories of wife and prostitute." (Tanenbaum 2015, 447) As many critics would argue, the connection between prostitution and marriage is mutually exclusive and dependent from each other at the same time. As Itziar Ziga suggests in *Devenir Perra*, the separation of women into "good" ones and "bad" ones works together (Ziga 2009, 113), which is equally encouraged by men, married women and conservative feminists, who police over the body of the *slut* in order to maintain the "heteropatriarchal order" (Ziga 2009, 113). For Ziga, this form of misogyny is expressed through "slut-phobia"¹⁵³ (Ziga 2009, 113). Hence, the control over the use of women's bodies and sexuality results into the "colonization of women's bodies" as a "material reality," (Dworkin 1981, 203) as Dworkin claims in *Pornography: Men possessing Women*. The use of this division can be understood into two different manners: the wife's role as a "good" woman is to provide offspring inside the institution of marriage, whereas the whore's trade is to provide with sexual satisfaction to men's fantasies, normally unsatisfied inside their marriages, through the business of prostitution. It seems that the main difference between the "wife" and the "whore" is their legal positions and the goods they have been assigned to provide and exchange under the financial domain of men in society. This legal status has been also transformed into social privilege under the morals of *female honorability*, as Gail Pheterson suggests in the following extract:

If a prostitute is a woman who "sells her honor for base gain or puts her abilities to infamous use," then by definition she has no honor and does no good. It is important to recognize that the woman's shame is based upon what she offers (her body and her sexual abilities) whereas the unworthy cause to which she puts herself is presumed man's sexual desire as customer (in slang, *trick* or *john*) or man's financial interest as "pimp." We are in fact then talking about female dishonor and male unworthiness. (Pheterson 1993, 42)

¹⁵³ In Spanish, the term **Ziga** uses is "putafobia" (2009:113).

Sexual purity and slut-shaming are intimately connected to a woman's social reputation, and Carrete's poem 'minami minegishi'¹⁵⁴ (Carrete 2014, 35) clearly illustrates this problem by using this J-idol's controversial viral video as an example. To briefly contextualize it, Minami belongs to one of the most popular J-pop female groups, *AKB48*, who recruits girls in their early teens to train them into singing and dancing until they reach adulthood and then retire from the group in order to join other artistic projects or let them fall into oblivion.

The agreement these artists includes a clause that forbids them from having any kind of sexual relationship and from dating other people during their stay in the group in order to preserve the infantilized and pure *kawaii* image these female idols must keep in order to satisfy their fans and the industry. Carrete acknowledges this fact in the following verse:



MINAMI MINEGISHI'S PUBLIC APOLOGY IN
YOUTUBE (2013)

"japanese pop idols aren't supposed to have boyfriends/ they're supposed to be virgins for their fans" (Carrete 2014, 35) Minami broke this agreement when she was caught leaving J-idol boyband Alan Shirahama's apartment after spending the night with him. As a result of this, she was downgraded from her position in the group and published a video at the group's official channel of herself apologizing to her fans by shaving her head¹⁵⁵. Her transgression can be interpreted as a form of slut-shaming, something that in Japanese culture is translated as "the rule is known as *renai kinshi* or 'forbidden love'" (Carrete 2014, 35), as Carrete expresses in the poem as well. According to Japanese pop culture, pop idols must keep appearances and show respect to their fans through leading an exemplary life, so in this sense, they are banned from having any kind of sexual liaisons or even abstain from having any kind of romantic relationships. The poem denounces how women's lives, that is the personal, becomes part of the public domain's interest as they gain fame and then become to be scrutinized. Virginity was commodified as part of the female artist's identity, otherwise, and as Carrete warns the reader, "if they're off-limits they're no longer worthy of fan's/ adoration and fantasy" (Carrete 2014, 35). Carrete uses Minegishi's extreme case to illustrate the absurdity of this obsession about women's sexual purity and their artistic reputation in a US context

¹⁵⁴ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 317](#).

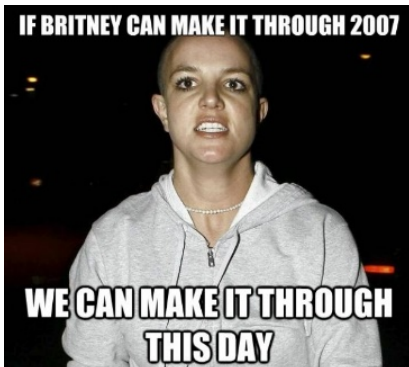
¹⁵⁵ Minami Minegishi's filmed apology: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF2y45Jl_sl

as well as internationally. There is another example of female celebrity blaming in ‘the cult of eternal youth’¹⁵⁶ from *Baby Babe*, by Carrete as well:

if i shaved my head would people think i’m like
britney or would they think i’m like
natalie portman or would they not care at all

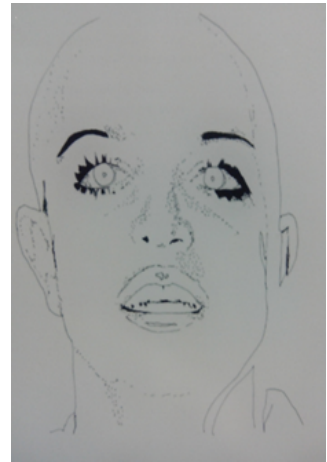
and would you stop loving me or
would you point and laugh but still
kiss my forehead (Carrete 2012, 5)

In this poem, we see how the figure of Britney Spears, simply referred to as ‘britney,’ stands as a symbol of public shame and how public pressure and expectations on women can push some celebrities to their limits. Spears shaved her hair in 2007 after going into drug rehabilitation, and that same year, she lost the physical custody of her children in favor of her ex-husband, Kevin Federline. She became the center of public mocking because of her following incidents with the constant paparazzi’s persecution, whose



BRITNEY SPEARS’ BREAKDOWN
MEME IN 2007.

picture, trying to attack the paparazzi who followed her, turned viral due to her previous status as the virginal American pop idol, and then following non-stop downfall. Her angry and threatening picture which was widely popularized by the press became viral and later turned into a meme about facing difficulties and down breaks because of her *annus horribilis*. Famous Internet celebrity and Spears’ fan Chris Crocker defended her in the viral video “Let Britney Alone”¹⁵⁷ after Spears’



CARRETE 5, 2012.

comeback performance at the *MTV Video Music Awards* in 2007: Crocker’s desperate defense of Spears illustrates how female artists have to undergo harsher criticism if they fail to submit to these social standards of respectability: “The woman is perfected”, Plath once claimed in her last poem *Edge* (1963).

About Natalie Portman’s reference at Carrete’s poem, the actress cut her hair for the recording of the movie *V for Vendetta*, a dystopian film based on the graphic novel of the same

¹⁵⁶ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 319](#).

¹⁵⁷ Chris Crocker’s complete viral video “Leave Britney Alone”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqSTXuJeTks>

name, in which she interpreted a working class woman called Evey who joins V's missions to destroy the government's fascist dictatorship. Evey's most famous scene is when she is thrown in prison and allegedly tortured by the police, as her loyalty is tested to V during those difficult moments. One of the most symbolic scenes is when she is shaved from her fair and wavy hair while she is crying. In many cases, to shave women's hair is considered a way humiliate women, and a common practice known as mob justice for political affiliations: during the Spanish Civil War, women associated to the Republican side were shaved in order to publicly mark them as traitors. Culturally speaking, women's long hair is a feminine trait and by shaving it, that attractiveness is erased by connoting androgyny or even masculinity. It seems that women's sexual lives can be used against them, especially when



NATALIE PORTMAN IN *V FOR VENDETTA* (2006)

they are celebrities: other cases, many US female artists have publicly claimed their virginity in order to be considered respected by the industry and the audience: from Jessica Simpson's vow to remain virgin until marriage, until the trend of 'purity rings' celebrities such as Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez or Miley Cyrus wore at the beginning of their careers as Disney teen artists more recently. The case of Britney Spears was paradoxical since her artistic aesthetic lingered between virginal sexiness, and her reputation started to collapse once her ex-boyfriend betrayed her by confessing to the press that they had sexual relationship while they were dating.

The controversy becomes raunchier in terms of how to re-appropriate slurs, such as *Slut*, in order to subvert its meaning and neutralize its effects on people's configuration of personal subjectivity and social identity: the translation from the "I" into the bodily expression and performance of such. In "virgin or witch"¹⁵⁸ by Ana Carrete (2012, 44), we find allusions to Disney films' villains in relation to the ambivalent duality of femininity. The opposition between these two tropes of womanhood relies on the fact that witches were considered to be sexually active due to their association to satanic rituals and their opposition to conventional marriage. Carrete's poem is composed by creating series of word-plays in relation to the



¹⁵⁸The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 319](#).

image that appears next to it. The options that are displayed in the image reminds of the civil status or gender/sex options displayed at a questionnaire for compiling basic information about a person, like “single”, “married” or “other”, but instead Carrete uses the words “virgin” and “witch”, which basically establishes the duality of femininity that culturally represents good and evil. The ticks represent the “v” in “virgin” whereas the double tick is the “w” in “witch”: this poem clearly illustrates how Carrete smartly plays with images, symbols and words in order to establish a connection between her poetry and visual arts, by incorporating innovative, humorous and witty new media at the same time. In the poem, we see how *Snow White*’s villain, which is ‘The Evil Queen’ and whose “poison apple pie” makes reference to, and *The Little Mermaid*’s villain ‘The Sea Witch’, who used a seashell to keep in the mermaid’s voice, are mentioned in the poem as popular references about witches directly taken from Disney’s representation of evil womanhood. The last verses make a joke by using contemporary references to female evil in American popular culture: the pizza becomes the precious object of this alternative and modernized-version princess, since it represents one of Americans’ favorite fast food, which is going to be taken away, like Snow White’s life by the poisoned apple or Ariel’s voice by a seashell.

By tracing back the implications of the manner in which female sexuality and body has been commodified through the exploitative patriarchal structures of prostitution and marriage, Tanenbaum argues that women’s sexual repression has been translated into a series of derogatory terms in order to perpetuate a sexually gendered hierarchy that submits and regulates women’s excess of sexual performance while justifying and encouraging male “uncontrolled” sexual activity (Tannenbaum 2015, 288) According to Tumanov’s findings, the Madonna-Whore complex works in order to prevent men’s anxiety about “paternal uncertainty” facing the possibility of women’s promiscuity working against their need to biologically avoid their own individual “genetic extinction.” (Tumanov 2011, 508) From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, Tumanov argues that “mythology is the symbolic manifestation of our two key biological concern – survival and reproduction.” (Tumanov 2011, 508) Therefore, and once more, culture is employed in order to control women’s bodies reproductive means, even though nowadays people are totally unaware of this original justification that is intrinsically recorded, with the blood and tears of women across millennia, at the very core of our linguistic discursive production. Sexual repression becomes a way to police women’s fertility to ensure paternal exclusivity as commodity. Men’s fear and insecurity about paternity is projected upon the regularization of “sex” through the materialization of bodily practices, as Butler would argue in *Bodies that Matters*, such as the legitimization of virginity as a valuable characteristic for an accepted, and so respected, form of femininity. The acceptance or

rejection of sexual promiscuity as a gendered performance of sexual freedom is culturally constructed upon this biological justification, whether this last one is fact or not. The acceptance of female sexuality would only occur under the grounds of male's control and possession over her body to ensure her reproductive means at the dangers of potential, as Freud argues in *The Taboo of Virginity*, commenting on the idea of von Krafft-Ebing's "sexual bondage" to the satisfaction of "a virgin's desire love":

[...] to describe the phenomenon of a person's acquiring an unusually high degree of dependence and lack of self-reliance in relation to another person with whom he has a sexual relationship. [...] Some such measure of sexual bondage is, indeed, indispensable to the maintenance of civilized marriage and to holding at bay the polygamous tendencies which threaten it, and in our social communities this factor is regularly reckoned upon. (Freud 1948, 193-194)

Here, Freud perfectly describes how society has regulated, from a cultural perspective, women's sexual urges through the imposition of monogamous heterosexual marriage and the materialization of the ideal of romantic love. As Butler would explain, defending the imagined existence of the "virgin's desire love" (Freud 1948, 193), and equate that desire to that for having an exclusively sexual relationship to a man, is the materialization of "sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (Butler 1993, 2) Freud's explanation of virginity perfectly describes the workings of misogyny, manifested in the Madonna-Whore complex that has dominated the patriarchal Christian and Western discourse upon policing femininity for centuries. Therefore, in order to elevate the idealization of heteronormative femininity, encapsulated in the myths of the Madonna and romantic love, there must be an antagonist to every heroine that fights to preserve the established patriarchal order of sexual relationships: this evil would be represented through the figure of the *Whore*, and much later, by the contemporary re-mastering of this one as the *Slut*. The pulsating opposition established by these opposing dichotomies are really productive in order to keep the norm immutable. As Valenti would claim in *The Purity Myth*, US culture has employed the "virginity movement" as a crusade against the "porning of America" as the major threat to keep justifying the relevance of the purity of femininity through the re-glorification of virginity in a highly secular and sexually emancipated society that prevails the cultural discourse nowadays:

Movement leaders *need* pornography in order to justify the extreme nature of the purity message they're pushing. Pornography and purity may make strange bedfellows, but they are sharing sheet space all the same. (Valenti 2009, 1119)

As the two mutually exclusive sides of the same coin, virginity and pornography works to ensure their mutually coexistence: they cannot exist without the order, since sexual liberation does not really exist yet. This is what Tanenbaum argues when she describes the prevalence of distinguishing between the “good slut” and the “bad slut” as a tension between compulsory sexual performativity expected among heterosexual interactions as a projection of men’s pornographic fantasies in romantic relationships: “A girl’s compulsion to achieve the “good slut” status is the result of the prude/slut contradiction. Not wanting to be perceived as prude, girls perform an act of sexual bravado – whether they want or not.” (Tanenbaum 2015, 879) Here, Tanenbaum questions the very nature of the performativity of the role of “good slut” as a form of sexual agency in which girls and young women behave according to their own sexual desire and for the sake of pursuing their own and individual sexual pleasure. It rather seems an imperative to be sexual inside the constraints of monogamous relationships with men: a transformation of Freud’s conceptualization of a devalued vision of romantic love and virginity associated to *prudence*, and hence to sexual passivity, towards a desired and expected, and yet controlled and measured, amount of *slutiness* as part of the new revalued form of femininity, highly influenced by the expectations created by accessible hardcore pornography online. Even though, this does not necessarily mean that a *slut* is totally perceived as a positive female figure in contemporary culture. In “my bad”¹⁵⁹ (*Baby Babe*, 2012) by Ana Carrete, the author establishes an interesting connection between female sexual desire in terms of agency and how this sexual double standard is applied in a funny situation that begins with an online conversation between two lovers, and that is also accompanied with an illustration that complements the meaning of the poem itself as well.

The poem mainly revolves around the expression “french press me”, creates the ambiguity in meaning of the phrase itself. The expression “french press me” can be interpreted as a suggestion of French kissing, which consists of kissing using only the tongues. The addition of the word “press” would suggest a passionate one that would lead to “hooking up” or having sex. The joke comes as a turn of the screw when the voice realizes that the phrase actually refers to a kind of coffee plunger literally. That’s why the image’s relevance makes sense, since the title “my bad” means my mistake, and the Spanish word “cochina”, which means “filthy” in English, suggests that she has a dirty mind

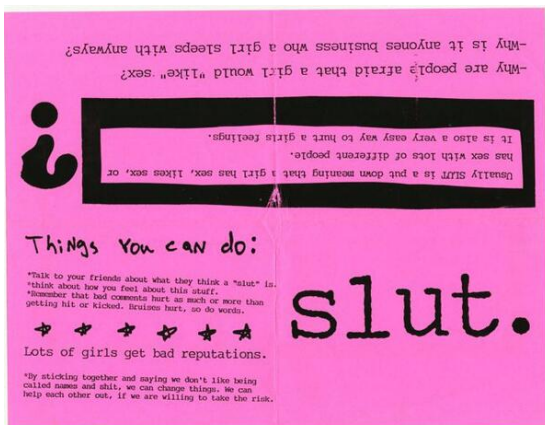


CARRETE 33, 2012.

¹⁵⁹The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 317](#).

in the sexual sense, emphasized by the presence of the Christian cross at the background, which symbolizes chastity and purity of thought. By contrasting this word and the image of the cross, Carrete emphasizes how religion has been an instrument to indoctrinate women into sexual repression and guilt, and hence, to control women's bodies.

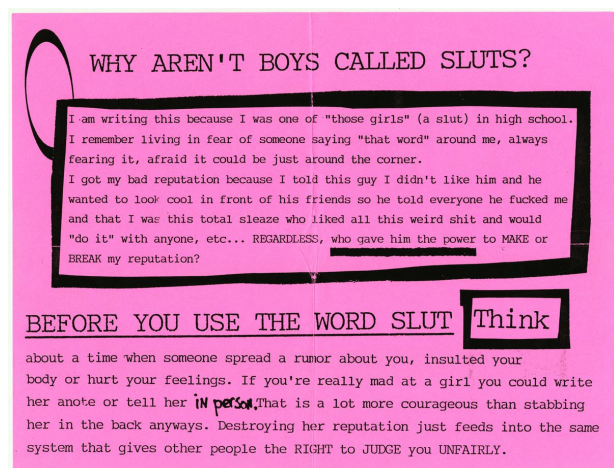
A material evidence, almost coming from the last traces of analogical archivism, can be found within the *Riot Grrrl Collection* initiated at Fales Library and Special Collection, New York University, in 2010. The document presented at this section belongs to the collection donated by *Bikini Kill's* ex-front singer and leader Kathleen Hanna, who authors the text as well. The



SLUT FLYER SIDE 1 (1989)

document, dated in 1989 (Fateman 2013, 148), has to side, each one divided in sections, since the flyer has been deliberately folded into a smaller piece, suggesting the intention of being open by revealing its content, like a secret note passed between students during a class at school. In fact, she intentionally put these flyers on "baby-sitters books" and other materials aimed for young girls at public libraries so her target audience was able to have access to them, as she explained to an

interview for the *HuffPost Live*. In the first side of this flyer, one can see how the word *slut*, in a big font and followed by a dot, is employed in order to serve as a cover of the flyer itself. Once the paper is unfolded, we can read at the on the other half of the paper above the front word *slut*, a definition of the word is provided at it follows by using a teenage-like informal speech: "slut. Usually SLUT is a put down meaning that a girl has sex, or has sex with lots of different people" As it shows this document, this definition from the late 1980s does not differ much from the ones that can found online at the very present: so far, the *slut* stereotype remains the same after almost thirty years. It also adds: "it is also a very easy way to hurt a girl's feelings" This sentence is important, since Hana acknowledges, way before Tanenbaum, that the figure of the *slut* is evidently linked to bashing and shaming a girl or a young woman by exposing her sexuality in public. Nowadays, this public shaming has ran through the physical limits of the high school and has found new ways to



SLUT FLYER SIDE 2 (1989)

perpetuate the stigma this word still carries on at all kinds of online platforms, in particular those which are the most popular among youths.

Apart from pointing and calling out a situation that is mostly common but highly ignored, Hana proposes a series of “things you can do” in order to prevent this forms of bullying by promoting education through open conversations and sorority among young girls instead of rivalry and jealousy. On the other side of the flyer, the Hana continues to point out to the misogynistic prejudices the term has in order to refer to the right of a girl’s freedom to be sexually active, independently of her choice of partners and the number of them. She invites other girls to stop creating a “bad reputation” about other girls by spreading rumors about their sexual lives, as it seems more evident in the following fragment: “if you’re really mad at a girl you could write her a note or tell her *in person*. [...] Destroying her reputation just feeds into the same system that gives other people the RIGHT to JUDGE you UNFAIRLY.” The typography, even the *hot bright pink*



KATHLEEN HANA BY LINDA ROSIER (1992)

used for the paper the flyer is made of, emphasizes the need for young girls to be raised up in an alliance towards fighting against sexism and other related-issues, making them reflect on themselves first. Hana was also famous for producing another *slut*-related work by employing her on body as the canvas for this one, as it is shown in the picture displayed here. According to Leah Perry, this form of “body writing” can be considered a form of “reclaiming a word”

through the “performance of shamelessness”, which is defined as “the performance of alternative forms of young female value” in order “to resist patriarchy and the brutalities of neoliberal capitalism.” (Perry 2015) As she also confesses at the *Huffpost* interview¹⁶⁰, she was trying to defy the “male gaze” by labelling herself as a *slut* by assuming that that was what men would be thinking about her. This defiant attitude characterized the *riot grrrl*’s movement as a whole, where the overtly display of female sexuality was employed as an attempt to subvert expectations about femininity and girlhood, despite failing to acknowledge how these forms of subversion perpetuates the way “women of color have been shamed as as hypersexual and sexually deviant, these practices

¹⁶⁰ Kathleen Hanna’s interview for the *HuffPost*: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kathleen-hanna-on-reclaiming-the-word-slut-and-girl-on-girl-bullying_us_5b56ee5fe4b0860924772e02

recuperated white privilege and class privilege in ways that are characteristically neoliberal,” (Perry 2015) which turns upside-down the complete success of the *riot grrrl*’s tactics of defiance:

Defying the male gaze by shamelessly embracing sexuality was a form of self-definition appropriate to a movement that viewed sociocultural reappropriation, personal transgression, and personal transformation as revolutionary (which the name “riot grrrl” suggests). [...] Riot grrrl was also criticized for perpetuating patriarchal objectification by embracing sexuality in some conventional ways, such as through stripping and other forms of sex work. (Perry 2015, *Lateral*)

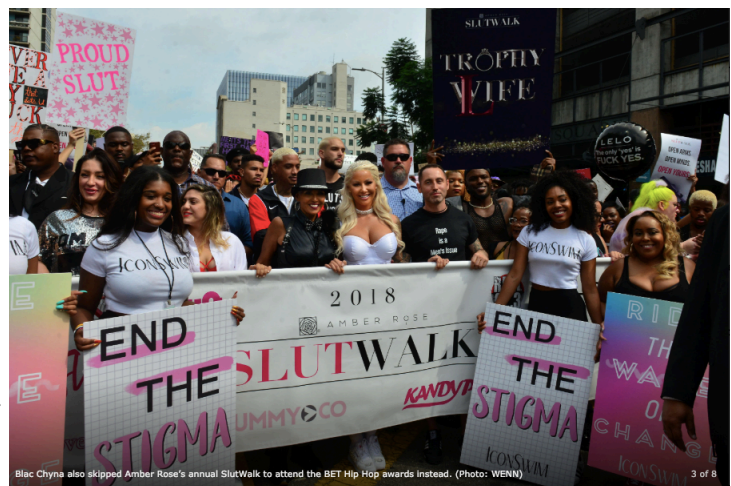
In her defense, Hana has stated that these contradictions are inherent to everyone and that “it doesn’t mean your feminism is invalidated” (Brodeur 24th April 2015, *The Seattle Times*), especially when that form of expression it is related to sexuality and politics. This echoes also



BEYONCÉ AT THE VMAS IN 2014.

not just Beyoncé dancing in a sexy manner while the word *feminist* is projected behind her, but also Amber Rose’s feminist activism by promoting her annual-parade version of the *SlutWalk*¹⁶¹ since 2015. Being herself a victim of sexual violence and slut-shaming at the age of 14, she has been publicly slut-shame in other various occasions by

both of her ex-partners, rappers Wiz Khalifa and Kanye West, due to her past as a stripper. Since then, Rose has been involved in many causes advocating for women’s and *LGTB*’s rights before initiating this project to prevent victim blaming and the use of derogatory labels, as it shows her promotional video “Walk of No Shame with Amber Rose.”¹⁶² On the other hand, many have criticized her arguing that “the entrepreneurship and the individualism behind a branded *SlutWalk* run counter to the ideas of feminism” (McDonald, October 5th, 2015). This branded form of “celebrity



AMBER ROSE’S *SLUTWALK* IN 2018.

¹⁶¹ <http://amberroseslutwalk.com/>

¹⁶² Amber Rose’s parody sketch *Walk of No Shame* (2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68kmBoUru-k>

feminism”, the same one Beyoncé has been accused too, is perceived as contra-productive for the means of her cause, since she is a public and famous figure closely connected to the business show and other forms of media capitalism.

5.1.2. @bjection: (Re)visiting F3male S3xual *Grotesque*

Nevertheless, the *slut* can be conceived as a marginal figure that transgresses the very notion of femininity and opens up the possibility of understanding female sexuality by subverting gendered roles and transforming the possibility of performance in relation to sexual identity. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler discusses the way in which “sex”, also understood as the gendered-sexualized body, has been constructed as the “materialization” of certain “regulated practices” and “regulatory norms”, which are socially constructed and reiterated throughout time in order to inscribed them into the body (Butler 1993, 1-2). Butler also argues that this “performative” way of constituting “sex” serves to establish a normative way of performing “sex” making it visible through the norms, “which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (Butler 1993, 2). By establishing this normative “sex” as the center of social acceptance, Butler also continues explaining the way the “margins” works in order to reinforce this center of normativity that regulates social as well as sexual relations, and produces a dichotomy between “subjects” and “abjects”, which respectively are located “inside” or “outside” of these established norms about accepted performance of “sex” itself:

The abject designates here precisely those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. [...] In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, and abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler 1993, 3)

But what is this “abjected” figure that Butler is talking about? In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva previously explored this notion of the “abject” in opposition to Lacan’s notion of the “object of desire”, as form of “primal repression” before the development of the relationship between the subject and its object(s) of desire and representation. This antagonism becomes the basis for the differentiation between what is later understood as the conscious and the unconscious sides of the psyche. Kristeva’s description of this “abject” element constitutes part of the *self* which the “I” is unable to “assimilate” due to its “imaginary uncanniness” that poses a “real threat” to the *self*: “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself out*, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I”

claim to establish *myself*.” (Kristeva 1982, 3) Also, this “abject” does not belong the realm of biological threat to the body, but it is related to the manner in which the “identity” of the *self* has been inscribed inside a “system” and a determined “order”: the “abject” is outside the “borders, positions, rules” that these systems have fixed as normative. But not only trespassing these boundaries of acceptability, it seems to linger “in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” conforming “a terror that disassembles” (Kristeva 1982, 4) what is already established, questioning its very core of foundations, not just by mere opposition or exclusion as Butler proposes.

In this theoretical framework, I would like to position the figure of the *slut* as “abject” in order to explain the mixed reactions that this term causes inside feminist discourses about political justice and sexual dignity. What positions the “abject” component of the *slut* is that compromises women’s sexuality between sexual liberation and embracement of perversion, and how female sexuality has been indoctrinated inside a series of precepts based on sexual modesty and submission in order to be socially accepted. The *slut* constitutes the “polymorphous” female “abject” that challenges the *Madonna-Whore* paradox in which contemporary women debate themselves between sexual agency and the embodiment of pleasure against the odds of sexual violence and social stigma. As Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality: volume I*, the coining of the term “perversion” in relation to sexuality has been a process in which “these polymorphous conducts were actually [...] drawn out, revealed, isolated, intensified, incorporated, by multifarious power devices. [...] The frozen countenance of perversions is a fixture of this game” (Foucault 1978, 48). Foucault also argues that this “proliferation of sexualities” encouraged the intervention of power structures (“medicine, psychiatry”) as well as the association with diverse economic interests (“prostitution, and pornography”), to produce and contain the “multiplication of pleasure” in favor of the “optimization of the power that controls it” (Foucault 1978, 48). Therefore, Foucault concludes that “pleasure and power” are not constantly struggling to overtake one upon each other, but instead both are “linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” (Foucault 1978, 48) that perpetuates their existence in an inter-mutual dynamic of collaboration and feedback loop.

In this sense, the *slut* conforms a disruption as well as a reinforcement of the inter-dependent tensions created by this bond between power and pleasure. Angela Carter explored the *Madonna/Whore complex* in terms of the pornographic embodiment of contemporary female sexuality through Sade’s heroines and sisters, Justine and Juliette, in *The Sadeian Woman*. According to Carter’s analysis, both characters’ are sexual antagonists of each other in terms of how they perform their gender and sexuality as women: “Justine is the holy virgin; Juliette is the profane

whore” (Carter 2013, 115) Carter describes Justine as a “monster of the fear of sexuality” (Carter 2013, 55), whose feminine passivity leads her to turn herself into a victim of sexual abuse and violence, and Sade’s pornographic narration of how Justine’s own negation to the enjoyment of her sexuality by means of performing her “virtue” and “honor” through “chastity” and “frigidity” reinforces her martyrdom as both a victim and a masochist (Carter 2013, 54-55). This position eventually leads her to her own destruction since she is unable to adapt to the deprived perversions of the world that surrounds her. On the other hand, her sister Juliette becomes a metaphor of “the inevitable prosperity of vice” (Carter 2013, 89), since she actively understands the power structures of society, and accordingly practices her role of the “perfect whore” by “causing pain” and “tak(ing) pleasure from pain”: she appropriates of and exploits “the instruments of power” for creating and producing her own benefits and escalate the social hierarchy through sexual acts (Carter 2013, 90-91) Contrary to Justine, her monstrosity originates from her extreme “rationality”, which leads her towards “financial profit and libidinal gratification” (Carter 2013, 90): Juliette embodies the “voice of reason” as a subversive act of her own femininity and, hence, uses sex as a form of terrorism (Carter 2013, 121). In this sense, Juliette’s *porn-terrorism* is comparable to the one preached by multidisciplinary Spanish artist Diana J. Torres, who conceives female pleasure as a vindictive act for avenging women’s sexual repression in Western recent history:

A female ejaculation is not only a mere act of pleasure that overflows spectacularly more or less. It is a terrorist act. A vengeance that drags a century of contained orgasms or those which never got to cum. (Torres 2015, 44)¹⁶³

This representation of female sexual abjection through the active performance of orgasming through deprivation and sadistic practices is what empowers the figure of Juliette, and what Torres understands as a reactionary form of “self-defense” against “a system that puts between our legs to install control devices inside our sexes” (Torres 2015, 67) In a culture that negates female sexual autonomy in order to control its bodily-biological production, female pleasure, and more concretely, her orgasms entail a threat to the structures of power established by the hetero-patriarchy. That is the reason why the figure of the *Whore*, and nowadays that of the *slut*, conforms an attempt to stigmatize female sexuality and to keep constraining it to the control of monogamous and heterosexual relationships. Female orgasms equate female empowerment, and therefore, its autonomy and independence from any kind of external association or dependence. And that is scary.

¹⁶³ Una corrida femenina ya no es solo un acto de placer que se desborda más o menos espectacularmente. Se trata de un acto terrorista. De una venganza que arrastra un siglo de orgasmos contenidos que nunca llegaron a llegar. (My translation)

Dangerous. Even grotesque. In this sense, the *slut* can be considered a contemporary embodiment of sexual abjection for women in order to defy a system that silences and hides female pleasure and active sexual performativity to the constraints of privacy and intimacy of heteronormativity and monogamy. As Russo proposes the “Siamese twin” as a new “model of sociality”, alternative to contemporary forms of feminist activism whose efforts were mainly focused on establishing a model for establishing a model of “normalcy” on womanhood, as it is described in *The Female Grotesque*:

At least in the United States, considerable effort has been put into reassurances that feminists are “normal woman” and that our political aspirations are “mainstream”. [...] Furthermore, it concedes much to the misogyny which permeates the fear of “losing one’s femininity,” making a spectacle of oneself,” “alienating men” (meaning powerful men) or otherwise making “errors.” Most importantly, it leaves uninterrogated the very terms and processes of normalcy. I begin this study on the side of the freak and the uncanny. (Russo 1995, 12)

Ziga proposes in *Devenir Perra, Becoming Bitch* in English, her notion of the *slut* subverts the codes of what a ‘good girl’ is supposed to be and to do with her body. Hence, the figure of the *slut* vindicates a side of womanhood does not sanctify hers as the ideal of normalcy. It explores a side of femininity neglected to deprivation and perversion, but which attempts to balance an ideal that imposes inherent goodness to decency, and so, this extends to womanhood as inherently pure, in sexual terms, according to the Judeo-Christian traditional perspective. To be a *slut* and reclaiming the right to publicly state it without leading to violent aggressions is a rebellious act against this repressive imposition of the hegemonic power structures. As Ziga defines, the *slut* can be understood as a form of “extreme femininity, radical, subversive, spectacular, insurgent, explosive, parodic, dirty, never impeccable, feminist, politic, precarious, combative, uncomfortable, angry, disheveled, of runny mascara, bastard, outdated, lost, offered, robbed, misplaced, excessive, exalted, edgy, evil, vicious, trashy, fake ...” (Ziga 2013, 34-35)¹⁶⁴ By taking into account these perspectives, both alternative and critical of the term *slut*, I would like to analyze how the figure of the *cam girl* is related to the figure of the *slut* in the following poems by Carrete and Bess, in which both authors mention about *cam girl(s)* it explicitly or refer to them indirectly: is it the contemporary *cam girl* the voyeuristic performance of the virtual *slut*?

¹⁶⁴ Una feminidad extrema, radical, subversiva, espectacular, insurgente, explosiva, paródica, sucia, nunca impecable, feminista, política, precaria combativa, incómoda, cabreada, despeinada, de rimel corrido, bastarda, desfasada, perdida, prestada, robada, extraviada, excesiva, exaltada, borde, canalla, viciosa, barriobajera, impostora ... (My translation)

5.1.3. *Cam Grrrl(s): The Slut's Virtual F@nt@sy*

In Carrete's "girls on cam"¹⁶⁵ (*Why Fi*, 2014), the poet makes an explicit allusion to these virtual sex workers who exploit the "male gaze", the voyeuristic "digital eyes" who stalk this pixilated, now in HD, (half)-naked bodies from the other side of their screens to do a certain set of sexual and non-sexual performances, depending on the audience's demand and how they tip her. In Carrete's poem, the poet explores the way *cam girls* perform femininity in a sexualized way that makes us reflect on the connections between desire and the visual mediated through virtual media. Clearly, Carrete exposes in these lines the way the ideal of femininity is displayed through the *cam girl's* performance, and the "boys'" reaction to this indirect form of interaction as a projection of a desired situation. This indirect interaction is mediated by how the 'male gaze' is being psychologically projected through the lenses of the webcam, establishing a dynamic between the performer and the viewer that subverts what Mulvey established as a definition of the 'male gaze': "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. [...] Woman displayed as a sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle." (Mulvey 1989, 62) This 'male gaze' reference can be found in the first line of the poem, "is that the way boys think about and or remember girls", in which Carrete reflects on how the image of women have been projected on, or rather re-transmitted to, the Internet. A step further is taken in Bess' poem "INSIDE OF THIS POEM THERE IS A ROCK AND THEN THERE IS ME" (Bess 2013, 396- 403)¹⁶⁶, in which the process of objectification of her body as a *cam girl* is a desired state of being, as it is explained in the following lines:

I want to be objectified. As an object, I am passive and
unmoving
until you move me.

I can be your bitch for cash
I can be new&softbodiedinnocent and dirty&used
but only if that is what you want

I want to be an object: Coveted

Craved
A representation

¹⁶⁵ The complete poem can be found in [Appendix 2, page 319](#).

¹⁶⁶ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 302](#).

of a woman and a Maybach in adjacent rap lyrics

An empty glass that can hold [...] (Bess 2013, 98)

This poem is the perfect example of how writing poetry can become a form of personal expression through which the writer projects her insecurities, her fantasies and her experiences under the form of the Russian doll effect, which is implied in the title: “inside of this poem there is a rock and then there is me.” (Bess 2013, 97) This suggests that poetry works in a way that is similar to a rock, as a metaphor for her external presentation of the self, and then there is “me”, that is herself, to be found in the internal part that flows over the poem as an observer, even though it is suggested to be trapped inside the “rock”. In these lines, the speaker of the poem compares the personification of the rock to the objectification of women, by expressing the dichotomies between the identity and the appearance, which determines the self to a certain extent: “I am just a human in this / woman body.” (Bess 2013, 97) Afterwards, the poetic voice rants about the contemporary vision on femininity from an American popular and cultural perspective, specially connected to the visuals of hip-hop music industry and traditional visions on womanhood: “I want to be objectified. As an / object, I am passive and / unmoving / until you move me.” (Bess 2013, 98) These lines express an articulation of desire projection onto the female body, and how this is interiorized by the object of desire as well. All sexual projection of the object of desire is based on the visualization of the desired object, which in this case is the female body or “feminized” one according to an already-established standards based on the heteronormative performativity of femininity together with an idealized female beauty. As Mulvey argues in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), the body of women is turned into a place of desirability that projects a series of conventions on womanhood as a mere signifier of sexual objectification:

Women then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (Mulvey 1989, 58)

This is the case of oversexualization of women used by popular culture to encourage any other kind of related or un-related forms of consumption, also known as *raunch culture*, as it is true for many music productions or movies. *Raunch culture* is a term coined by Ariel Levy in 2005 that attempts to define a phenomenon that results from the imposition of “sexiness” and “hotness” into a women’s appearance and performance to turn it into a consumable good, rather than a form of connecting sexually between bodies in order to obtain pleasure from it, particularly true for women themselves: “Sexiness is no longer about being arousing or alluring, it’s about being

worthwhile” (Levy 2005, 31). On the other hand, “hotness requires projecting a kind of eagerness, offering a promise that any attention you receive for your physicality is welcome.” (Levy 2005, 33) Examples of this commodification of the oversexualized self are Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian, whose leaked home-made porn lead them towards fame and celebrity status as a commercialized platform for their public persona and career. In Bess’ poem, the objectified woman is described as “passive”, “unmoving”, a “bitch” hungry for money, “new”, “softbodied”, “innocent”, “dirty” or “used”. These qualifiers embody the contemporary trope of the *Virgin/Whore* dichotomy. A contemporary celebrity embodiment of this contradicting stereotype is singer Miley Cyrus, after releasing her controversial single ‘We can’t stop’¹⁶⁷ videoclip in 2013 and her polemic twerking dance at the *MTV Video Music Awards* with Robin Thicke. Cyrus passed from being the embodiment of the American dreamy *girl next-door*, pop-country singer, a fervent public defender of sexual abstinence and holder of the *Purity Ring* during her teen years, to become an oversexualized version of her public persona by appropriating African-American hip-hop twerking movements, clothing and attitude: she adopted a new persona in order to portray her coming age into adulthood, an attempt to erase her edulcorated past as member of *Disney Channel*. This is confirmed in the following lines: “I want to be an



MILEY CYRUS TWERKING ON ROBIN THICKE AT THE *MTV VIDEO MUSIC AWARDS* IN 2013.

object: / coveted / craved / a representation / of a woman and a Maybach / in adjacent rap lyrics.” (Bess 2013, 98) Her radical dualism shows how the female body has become another commodity for capitalistic consumerism, especially evident in the show business: how the stereotypes depicted on pornographic films, on femininity and the female body in general, are becoming more standardized and culturally spread and internalized by women themselves, as Levy stated, as a dubious expression of sexual liberation and female emancipation.

The frailty of this representation of womanhood is embodied, somehow echoing Plath’s tone in *The Bell Jar*, in the line: “An empty glass that can hold” (Bess 2013, 98) This one can be interpreted as a metaphor on the female body, which is transparent and malleable (or easily influenced) by the induction of this sexual projection of the male gaze onto the women’s physical appearance, that becomes a mere container of all these ideals and contemporary images and

¹⁶⁷ Miley Cyrus’ “We can’t stop” videoclip (2013): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrUvu1mlWco>

attitudes on what is to be a “sexy” woman nowadays, which differs from being sexual, as Levy suggests. This repetitive structure reproduces the attempt of cyclical influencing on the formation of the self: materializing the sublimation of the self, the way people influence our perceptions of our self, the cultural and social stereotypes on women, and the projections of desire of her partner, the strangers and even herself. This process of internalizing external appealing traits is also evident in the following lines from Bess’ poem:

Inside of this poem there is a rock
and then there is me
(and all of the me’s that I can imagine)
(and all the me’s that men can imagine for me) and then
there is you

(and all of the you’s that you can imagine)

(and all the you’s that I can imagine for you) and then
there are strangers. (Bess 2013, 98- 99)

In Carrete’s poem “girls on cam” (2014, *Why Fi*), there’s an explicit subversion of the dichotomy between “active/male and passive/female” that Mulvey describes as a key element in order to analyze the ‘male gaze’: the girl is actively attempting to perform a simulated, even physical, interaction with an unknown “boy”. The actions she performs are those of “mov(ing) in slow motion”, “run(ning) or spin(ning) around”, “blow(ing) kisses”, “star(ing)”, “smil(ing)”, “laugh(ing)” and “touch(ing) his thigh”, displaying an “extremely quirky” (Carrete 2014, 5) attitude above all. This phantasy-projection of feminine girl by the passive “boy” viewer is actively performed by the *cam girl* in order to receive something in exchange: fame and, especially and mainly, monetary compensation. In this sense, the performer actively materializes the viewer’s phantasies on the ‘girlfriend experience’ through her bodily image and attitude, playing a role that allows her to receive a remuneration that she herself settles: she is an autonomous producer of this fiction, that she chooses to perform or not, but only virtually. Maguire also argues that the *camgirl* is not a “a powerless victim of a gaze that alights on her” (Maguire 2018, 46), as others suggest:

The camgirl constructs the viewer as a voyeur, and she consents to her own surveillance. Because she is aware of the camera, and of the audience, she is able to choose how much information and what kind of behaviours that the viewer is permitted to witness. [...] This kind of camgirl practice has been understood as exploiting the commodification of the female body in the specular economy (Knight 200, 22), but it is also a form of agency that comments on and engages with the position of the gazed-upon individual. Further, the camgirl has the opportunity to gaze back. (Maguire 2018, 46-47)

As it is already stated, there is no doubt that the relationship between *cam girl* and *viewer* is mediated through the lenses of the *webcam*, which is recording the *cam girl's* performance. There is no physical contact, as it also happens in *strip tease* shows, but in this type of spectacle, not only touch and taste have been deprived: the sense of smell, that could sexually connect the spectator and the stripper through the pheromones emitted in a heated environment as it could be the stage of a *strip club*. The only senses left are hearing and seeing: but hearing and seeing are only perceived by the viewer, not the *cam girl*, who only receives the requests via text as the only way of interaction, and she is only able to see her image reflected on her *webcam* screen. This phenomenon is explicitly described in the following excerpt from Bess' poem, as it follows:

Right now, on my webcam, hundreds strangers
have fallen in love with me and they tell me this

as I pull at my underwear and place them into a poem. (Bess 2012, 99)

The act of establishing a *web-cam* conversation is a wide spread form of interaction across the world, in which the impossibility, or non-desirability, of establishing face-to-face conversations is substituted by creating the illusion of having one by using a computer with Internet connection and a camera that connects to the Web and sent an online-*live* video, whose visual quality has drastically improved in the recent years. This is what Jones would call 'embodied authenticity' in her article "I get Paid to Have Orgasms: Adult Webcam Models", an illusory effect that originates from the combination between a manipulation of the projected and the impression of its artificial authenticity, in the manner that cinema does it. But in this case, these images projected are manipulated by the person filmed, rather than by a third party, as it happens in the film industry. Contrary to *peep shows*, *web cam girls* are expected to mimic a sort of sexual interaction with the viewer even this one is still a voyeuristic anonymous user lusting in the online limbo. This scene also reminds of Carrete's poem "girls on cam", since it depicts the exposition of young girls on online chat platforms, like *Chatroulette*, *Chaturbate* or *MyFreeCams*, in order to experience the admiration and feeling being desired and watched by strangers, especially to a male audience. Bess portrays this 2.0 voyeuristic experience in relation to conditioning one's self-stem: this explains why Bess uses the "rock" as symbol of strength and integrity, and also to indicate indifference and emotional detachment: it embodies a way of surviving in a highly emotionally passive-aggressive society and culture than harms the individual by attacking their self-stem and integrity, whereas a "rock," despite being an object, it cannot be objectified in a way that affects it, because it is already

implied in its nature, contrary to what happens to human beings and their denigration to labels and impossible ideals. This process of bodily-commodification is also explored by Bess in the poem ‘OVERSIZED T-SHIRTS’¹⁶⁸, which is an allusion to the hyper-sexualization of young girls, especially through the diffusion of female intimacy through their personal computers and online social media. The lines that concern us in this sense are the following:

What if I’m actually boring and I only know how to
communicate with people [men]
via a hyper-sexualized version of myself? I’m posting this
inquiry

to the conspiracy theory message boards. (Bess 2013, 95)

Bess expresses in this fragment the insecurities of young girls respecting their own bodies, and how the male gaze conditions the way young women project an image of themselves in order to be admired or liked, something which is highly encouraged by social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Instagram* who have specific options to allow people to express like or dislike about the content shared online to the rest of users: “What if I’m actually boring and I only know how to / communicate with people [men] / via a hyper-sexualized version of myself?” (Bess, 2013, 389) These lines sum up how young women objectify themselves in order to be liked on the Internet, and also how they are forced to fit and to use a standardized appeal in order to attract the attention of other viewers, which are mostly men. The use of likes and dislikes shows graphically which contents are more popular and, hence, their posts to adapt to what is popular or *trendy* in order to keep or increase their online status.

The controversy is served. Maguire argues that *webcam* girls are the “are pioneers of webcam technology and creator of automedia” who create a mediated bi-directional mutual exchange that problematizes the “objectifying gaze” by allowing them “to actively engage with ideas around the consumption of the female body and its public surveillance” and by exposing the “anxieties around identity on the internet, feminine embodiment and the gaze, visibility, the consumption of eroticized female bodies, the digital potential for complicating notions of public and private, and the digital mediation of intimacy” (Maguire 2018, 48-49). On the other hand, Levy considers this over-exposition of the female body and sexuality, in particular online, does not guarantees the liberation of women from constraining social archetypes about self-worth and self-perception: “The freedom to be sexually provocative or promiscuous is not enough freedom [...]

¹⁶⁸ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 303](#).

We have simply adopted a new norm, a new role to play: lusty, busty, exhibitionist” (Levy 2005, 200). As Rachel Stuart analyses in her article about webcamming and sex work, the success of this medium is motivated by how the Internet is radically changing the sex industry by installing new forces into the dynamics of profit through “mainstream corporation”, which is substituting the figures of the “sleazy pornographer or the shady trafficker” (Stuart 19th December 2017, *The Conversation*) who monopolized sex work in the analogic world of the past. This form of entrepreneurship has allowed sex-workers, in particular women, to have “the power to define” (Stuart 19th December 2017, *The Conversation*) the type of sexual work they are willing to do, how, where and when without being exposed to additional risks associated to their industry. For Jones, however, even the work of *camgirls* is still “exploitative and enacted within patriarchal systems”, it can be potentially subversive for presenting alternative discourses about female sexuality and gender by being produced and projected by the creation of “various forms of pleasure in the process” (Jones 2016, 228) for the women involved in this industry.

Nevertheless, this communicative form of sexualization of the female body shows clearly how the Internet or the virtual world is just an extension or reflection of the real world, where young women are potentially vulnerable for assimilating toxic notions about femininity and sex if they stick to the shallowness illusion of the pixelated image that blinds our insatiable eyes: “Sitting on your couch in my best underwear, with my hair up and your old shirt on, I am small boy swallowed by his father’s clothing proud & smiling. LOOK WHAT I’VE DONE, DAD.” (Bess 2013, 95) Back to the poem, these lines makes one wonder how the speaker’s confidence and self-esteem is dependent on the admiration of her physical appearance, on how sexy she looks to the likes of men, who are presented as paternal figures to which she has to please as an insecure child. This phenomenon clearly mimics the insatiable need of Millennials for being the center of attention and for being watched by others, who can be known or unknown people around the online world. Online performances allow an endless number of diverse forms of interaction, and they highly depend on the type of conversations the people involved in these chats are having during this time. In this sense, an important part of social interactions, and the sexual ones as well, are produced on the Internet where a mixture between language and image has become a virtualized medium for communication that also expresses contemporary views on culture, sex and the body.

5.2. The Philomena’s Momentum: SlutWalk(s), #PussyGrabsBack and #MeToo (a)Venging Rape Culture

Feminism is the radical notion that women are people - Cheris Kramarae

Violence gives birth to itself. So we can rightly speak of chains, spirals, and mirros of violence – or, as we prefer – a continuum of violence. – Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, “Introduction: making sense of violence” (2004, 1)

In the recent years, public debates about women’s security in relation to sexual violence have emerged in front of the eyes of an astonished Western society who took for granted that such events did only occurred in other *underdeveloped* or marginalized countries at the other side(s) of the globe. Despite achieving the recognition of equal rights and the improvement of laws and security forces to protect women against daily sexual violence in most public spaces, there is still a high number of this sexual violence that is not recorded by the official statistics and other police reports about sexual attacks and harassment on women that accurately portray the truth about this issue. Usually, these official reports do not reflect the personal testimonies, and neither its complexity, under a judicial framework of social justice. Most women, as some reports illustrate, have suffered some sort of sexual violence at least once in their lives: most of times, the diversity of these aggressions have been repeated to some extent throughout time by different perpetrators. Most of these cases have not been reported to the correspondent authorities. Hence, Western government reports and statistics records do not show the factual implications of sexual violence in women’s lives and mental health. Furthermore, how does this phenomenon affect interpersonal relations? How does this collective (silent) trauma manifest itself in social relations and cultural representations nowadays? How does feminist movements, and other platforms, have addressed and responded to this context of social mobilization and political shock concerning sexism and sexual violence against women in (rich and progressive) *first* world countries such as the United States of America?

5.2.1. ‘Theoretical Violence’: *Rape Culture* (re-)visited

To explore how sexual violence is represented in the poetry of *Alt [C]lit*, I will start the discussion with Gabby Bess’ poem ‘THEORICAL VIOLENCE’¹⁶⁹ (*Alone with Other People*, 2013). This is a poem about human relations, sex and violence, where the theory and the practice of structural violence relies on the sexual, physical and emotional abuse of women as individuals and as bodies. The poem is divided into two parts, separated by a single verse which is signaled by italics. The first part is a clear allusion to rough sex displayed in pornography, with sadomasochistic and abusive connotations which clearly serves as a medium to humiliate women and femininity as well. Bess writes on sex by describing it as “rough / to bring pleasure” (Bess 2013, 8), due to the

¹⁶⁹ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 305](#).



BESS 9, 2013.

practice of “choking & punching & the sloshing of liquids in the back of your throat to spit near my eye area.” (Bess 2013, 8)

All these sexual practices can be dangerous and provoke the death of the participants if not being responsible. The above image belongs to *Alone with Other People* as well, whereas the one below is part of the *Black Dot Series*: in terms of content-wise, there are some similarities between both images. The expression “fuck” is the imperative act that allows to cross the limits between consent and abuse. At both images, the speaker passively expresses her suffering from acts of vexation from her partner, by being spited on. As she later confesses, she uses these images, that depict a

dark side of the self (“we both become ugly”), in order to express her guilt and regret, and so transmit it to her readership. The poem describes a series of BDSM practices which explore the subversive and extreme limits between pain and pleasure, between submission and domination. For example, “choking” is a well-known common practice to bring more intense orgasms by suffocating the partner’s neck. “Punching” is another practice, also known as *donkey punch*, in order to produce involuntary contractions of the anal sphincter muscles or the



GABBY BESS’S *BLACK DOT SERIES* (2012)

vaginal passage so the orgasm intensifies. The two other sexual practices, “sloshing” and “spitting”, involve the intervention of body fluids: one involves oral sex with ejaculating in the partner’s mouth, known as *oral creampie*, or the ejaculation into the partner’s face or close to the eye area, as a *cumshot* or *open-eye*, *cumshot* or *pirate eye*. All of these (un)conventional sexual practices are influenced by the pornographic industry as a way to stimulate an over-saturated public who is already too used to explicit sex and its accessibility through the democratization of Internet.

The violence in pornography has increased over the years quicker than ever and this has contributed to an increase of extreme sexual practices depicted on current porn movies, including some illegal ones. This can be explained by the aggressive dynamics of male dominance over female bodies, as Andrea Dworkin describes in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*: “Women as whore exists within the objective and real system of male sexual domination.” (Dworkin 1981, 200) Bess seems to depict this sexual violence as a common experience among young people, who are

more likely to be over-influenced by imitating the performance of these violent sexual practices by their overexposure to free online porn through their personal computers while growing up in the early 2000's. But in Bess' poem, what is mostly striking is the wide acceptance of these vexations among young women rather than men, by how the poem illustrates an apparent disposition to engage into such practices just for the mere fact of providing pleasure to the male counterpart. This first impression is reinforced by the following lines:

To reduce my suffering, you can take
my own hands within yours
to rub the spit into my eyes &
into my mouth & you can kill me
inside of your head as many
times as you need, just to feel
calm. (Bess 2013, 7)

The projection of murderous fantasies to the sexual partner is the culmination of all this display of sexual violence. Afterwards, Bess makes the next remark: "Is anyone moved / by the plainness of raw skin anymore?" (Bess 2013, 7). In these lines, the speaker points out to how nudity in pornography is not relevant anymore as it was at other moments of history. The eroticism of naked bodies is not enough to move an audience already fed up on explicit images of sex, not even sex itself is enough to satisfy the public, but the intensity of the performance in which aggression and humiliation built up the different genres of the porn industry, from soft to hardcore. Again, we are questioned about "*where did this tenderness come from?*" (Bess 2013, 7) as a kind of ironic reflection on the true nature of human sexuality and the influence of pornography on an increase in violent attitudes towards sex. In this second part, we see how we go from a physical analysis of sexual violence towards one of emotional abuse, the psychological consequences of these aggressions. The verse starts like this: "To reduce your suffering, / I will fill the inner lining of/ my stomach/ with bullets by ingesting / them like pills / until I sag heavy / & full in your hands." (Bess 2013, 7) The body becomes a container of bullets, which are compared to pills, maybe ones related to reduce anxiety or depressive modes.

Hence, these "bullets" symbolize the emotional damage resulting from this physical and psychological abuse in the form of sex. This abuse is prolonged in order to satisfy the partner by becoming a puppet in the hands of the abuser, being "sag(ing) heavy & full" (Bess 2013, 7). The manipulation of the speaker's body at the hands and will of her partner is another way to show his power and control over her. The tension between the couple is showed up in the following lines: "The shifting of skin on skin / sounds something like an / underhanded truce. Like / kissing in a

trench with your / fingers crossed behind your back” (Bess 2013, 7). Here, we are presented to the reality behind these acts of sexual violence: the lack of emotional involvement produces a lack of satisfaction that only violence and aggression seem to cover for a while. The intimate act of “shifting of skin on skin” (Bess 2013, 7) is supposed to bring contention and emotional involvement by the sense of touch, the intimacy created as a result of the direct contact between the nude skin. Bess compares this interaction to “an underhanded truce” or even worse, to kissing by being trapped in the middle of a war, “trench”, and lying by having “your fingers crossed behind you back” (Bess 2013, 7). This shows an abusive dynamic inside a sexual relationship that is performed by a dominant figure upon a submissive one in a violent context.

Another poem that depicts the sexual violence in graphic depictions of sex is Melissa Broder’s “Protrusion”¹⁷⁰ (Broder 2014, 69) from *Scarecrone*, a title that seems to allude to something that is emerging out, like penis or other phallic-object form. The poem acquires some strong sexual undertones under this lens, which connects with Broder’s obsession with finding ways to transcend spiritually the body and the apparent disconnection of her language with the real world. The first line contributes to this interpretation, as the speaker forces us to imagine her with her legs spread open, feet up, and holding them in a kind of acrobatic and pornographic pose for deeper penetration: “I hold my legs like two chicken drumsticks.” (Broder 2014, 69) The speaker compares her “legs” with a pair of “chicken drumsticks”, which is basically the leg-part of chicken, establishing a connection between the female body and meat production by means of consumerism, either sexual or alimentary. As Adams states, “meat eating measures individual and societal virility” (Adams 2010, 48), hence treating the female body as “meat” during sex is intimately connected to this notion of objectifying women’s bodies “as consumable, as usable” (Adams, 2015, 6). Therefore, the connection between meat and women’s bodies as objects are translated into comparing the processes of eating and having sex with the performance of consumption by male subjects. This idea is even reinforced by the Broder when she states that “I could rip them off” (her legs) (Broder 2014, 69), which reinforces the connection between the food industry and the consumption of the female body as a violent act of cannibalism. The speaker, who is the subject of consumption, also encourages to disembody her physical presence by “rip(ing) off” her body for the delight of a third party. The act of eating, as Kristeva claimed in *The Powers of Horror: Abjection*, becomes a grotesque activity. Or as Cixous claims in the following extract from “Love of the Wolf” about the eroticism implied in the act of eating:

¹⁷⁰ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 309](#).

For us, eating and being eaten belong to the terrible secret of love. We love only the person we can eat. [...] Because loving is wanting and being able to eat up and yet to stop at the boundary. [...] Everything in love is oriented toward this absorption. [...] Fear of eating, fear of the edible, fear on the part of the one of them who feels loved, desired, who wants to be loved, desired, who desires to be desired, who knows that there is no greater proof of love than the other's appetite, who is dying to be eaten up yet scared to death by the idea of being eaten up, who says or doesn't say, but who signifies: I beg you, eat me up. (Cixous 2005, 78)

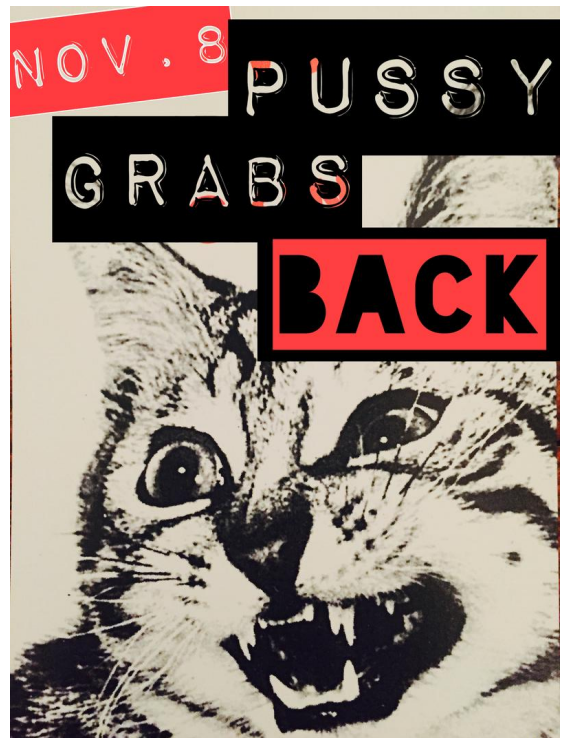
Applying this logic of sexual desire and the metaphoric consumption of meat to Broder's imagery, the transformation the speaker of the poem undergoes during the sexual act can be read as a kind of demonic possession: "I am capable of nothing but black words on a white tongue. God gave me a red tongue / and only god knows / who god is." (Broder 2014, 69) A similar reference to the "red tongue" can be seen in Plath's "Maenad":

This month is fit for little.
The dead ripen in the grapeleaves.
A red tongue is among us.
Mother, keep out of my barnyard,
I am becoming another. (Plath 2001, 133)

Both speakers, from Broder and Plath's poem respectively, are possessed and transformed by an unknown entity or substance that turn them into dangerous beings for the establishment. It is interesting to observe this transition from masochistic self-mutilation and disposition towards a more sadistic agency through linguistic performativity of "black words" (Broder 2014, 69), which suggests a connection to witchcraft and spells. Broder focuses in the tongue as a source of evil, closely connecting language to the dangers of expressing and producing, using colors to add meaning to the mix: "black" for negative things, such evil, death and the dangers of the night and darkness; "white" for purity, innocence, wholeness and completion; whereas red represents hatred, anger, warning or death. The contrast of meaning between these three colors pretends to embody the multiplicity of human's personality and rage of emotions, most of the times contradictory and unpredictable. Driven towards ecstasy by the violence of the sexual act, Broder establishes an indirect analogy between meat eating, sex and the female body: the performativity implicit in the postures and the comparison of her "legs spread open" (Broder 2014, 69) to the pornographic image of a woman waiting to be penetrated, passive and accessible, by the cissexual male fantasy put into words, the flesh translated into textual violence.

5.2.2. Fighting Back: When rape turns political

Despite the recent impact of the movement *#MeToo* as a platform that mainly works online, and which serves as the Philomena's tapestry or robe to allow speak up their personal experiences on sexual abuse, which shows up the vulnerability to which women are exposed to in a context of sexual violence, most of cases are performed by their heterosexual male counterparts. Before the Weinstein scandal hit the headlines of important newspapers such as the *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* in October 2017, other famous figures from Hollywood have been accused of being sexually abusive towards women previously: such are the well-known cases of Woody Allen, Billy Cosby, and Roman Polanski. The actresses who publicly denounced Weinstein united and created a series of online platforms in order to record these experiences and directly point out to the victimizers, such are the examples online actions such as that of *Vox*¹⁷¹, which records a public list of "celebrities, politicians, CEOs, and others who have been accused of sexual misconduct since April 2017", and *Time's Up*¹⁷², an organization created to publicly denounce and display the identity of the abusers in power. Many other voices have been heard before the movement hit the online platform and made more visible these normalized situations of sexual aggressions against women. The online platform became a new medium through which to speak up against abuse, as a virtual megaphone used to reach out even those who did not want to listen, to acknowledge or even believe the widespread existence of this constant coercion and multiple forms of sexual violence. *Twitter* hashtags turned the voice of the unheard, the invisible, the anonymous into a huge mass of sorority which bounded through the same common experience: that of sexual violence, abuse, and coercion. Other platforms have preceded and come after the breaking point that *#MeToo* established as a multimedia platform for re-inventing feminist activist in the



PUSSY GRABS BACK POSTER (2016)

¹⁷¹ *Vox*'s list of sexual harassment assault allegations: <https://www.vox.com/a/sexual-harassment-assault-allegations-list>

¹⁷² *Time's Up* Official webpage: <https://www.timesupnow.com/>

Digital Era: *The Everyday Sexism Project*¹⁷³ launched by Laura Bates in 2014, a website which collected the testimonies of women who has suffered or is suffering sexism in a daily basis; *#PussyGrabsBack* as a backlash political campaign against Trump was running for US Presidency in 2016, after a leaked video from 2005 in which the Republican candidate commented on groping women publicly. It seems that due to the visibility provided by social media, this type of experiences is gaining more attention and impact due to the social relevance of the victims, and how they are no longer scared to speak and join forces to take actions against the abuses of the powerful. For once, the identity of the aggressor is the focus, and there is an attempt of quantifying the number of victims and the circumstances in which the abuse took place in order to open up a debate about the safety and protection of women in professional contexts, as it is illustrated at Lena Dunham's episode in *Girls*.

At the beginning of 2017, Lena Dunham's series *Girls* directly addressed this issue in the episode *American Bitch* of its last season. In the middle of a series of sexual scandals that were cleaning the Hollywood sphere out before the bigger breakout of the infamous Weinstein's case, Dunham's episode was highly praised by the critics and the press for pointing out to the way sexual harassment and violence perpetuates women's subordination in their professional careers and conditions their future prospects by remaining silenced or facing social backlash and scrutiny for speaking up and prove their credibility against renowned and powerful heterosexual men. As Edelstein reviews for *The Guardian*, the "scenario" Durham presents in this episode "is not unfamiliar" for young professional women: "when professional power is occupied by men, it's not uncommon to find yourself in a situation when the lines between work and sex become blurred." (Edelstein 25th February 2017, *The Guardian*) Furthermore, the double-edged game of victimization and mutual accusations is perfectly staged to show up different perspectives on what is power imbalance from two antagonist positions on sexual, inter - and intra-personal relations. Where does one cross the line between consensual and non-consensual sexual advances? Durham constantly puts this question in the viewer's head throughout the whole episode, as it shall be analyzed next bellow.

The protagonist, Hannah, visits a middle-aged respected writer, Chuck, whom many young aspiring female authors have denounced him online for sexual abuse and harassment. Hannah, who has written an article on a feminist blog about the case is invited by Chuck in order to defend himself from such accusations, playing the victim-role throughout the whole episode as he also tries

¹⁷³ *Everyday Sexism* webpage: <https://everydaysexism.com/>

to allure Hannah by praising her wit and writing skills. Hannah rants against his plea by explaining how power and sexual abuse are intrinsically intertwined by narrating her own traumatic experience of power abuse with an English teacher when she was just a kid. There are many clever highlights throughout the whole episode in which Durham brilliantly builds up a subtle tension in the audience towards an ending that climaxes when little-red-riding-hood Hannah is trapped by the lies of the cunning-wolf Chuck: lying together in bed, while holding Roth's *When She Was Good*, Hannah grabs Chuck's penis when he puts it to her on her lap. The irony of the image is also complete when later Hannah leaves Chuck's apartment, in rage but astonished by her own naïve gesture and attitude throughout the encounter, is passed by an army of women



GIRLS HBO'S 'AMERICAN BITCH' (EPISODE 3, SEASON 6, 2017)

who enter one by one Chuck's place to certainly meet the same fate: the cycle of power, abuse and sexual harassment conform part of women's narrative of their daily experiences, and more common than we initially thought in working contexts of any kind, as Nussbaum writes for *The New Yorker*:

If you want to compliment a creator, tell her she's singular—exceptional, superior, not like other girls. Chuck's punishment is that he's made Hannah feel the ways in which she's not special. His payback is that he's made Hannah female again, interchangeable with other women. He's put her back into that concord of voices, another creative girl with a story that she can never tell. (Nussbaum, 27th February 2017, *The New Yorker*)

The relevance of this episode is due to its cinematic accurate portrait of a situation that would not be initially considered, neither legally, as sexual abuse or harassment, since Hannah participates, and even engages, in Chuck's sexual advances towards her without employing neither verbal nor physical violence against her. The subtlety of Chuck's abuse shows up the many forms abuse can take and how this diversity makes the core of the problem invisible. Kornhaber points out that Hannah's story of trauma and abuse is a tiny dot that conforms part of a bigger unframed picture: "an older, powerful man praising a younger woman's intellectual talents—but also tying that praise to flesh. Hannah's value as a writer and her value as a body were long ago swirled together by a gatekeeper, and Chuck did something very similar to the young would-be authors he had sex with. If they consented, what were they consenting to? A validation of their mind, or the notion that what really matters is their body?" (Kornhaber 25th February 25th 2017, *The Atlantic*) The emotional trick that Chucks employs by praising intellectually his sexual prey proves the power

imbalance between him and her younger female peers, and the constant degradation they must endure in order to achieve or keep their professional careers. As Chuck warns Hannah at the beginning of their meeting, matters such as these cases of dubious abuse are a waste of both of their times and even talents: “You should be using your funny to tackle for subjects that matter. Me, who I may or may not have got a blowjob from consensually in a college town does not fucking matter” (Durham 2017, season 6, ep. 3, 4:29-4:40). As Kornhaber points out in his review of the episode, trauma weaves more trauma in women’s lives and sexual encounters, as Hannah’s past abuse represents a repeated “pattern of warped gender relations” (Kornhaber 25th February 2017, *The Atlantic*) throughout time that perpetuates the intimate relation between power and sexual abuse which are reproduced in every single aspect of one woman’s existence. Emami’s analysis for *Vulture* points out towards how women are more prone to suffer this type of abuse is due to the precariousness of their status: in an economy of workforce excess and few positions to fill, women have to work much harder and hence become more exposed to this condition whether they play the same game or not. Hannah becomes the perfect victim because of her need for recognition and low self-esteem, a juncture that makes her accomplice and victim of this crime, the perfect breeding ground for her own double (and unaware) victimization:

The way men who have amassed a certain kind of capital think that it’s a fair trade for someone else’s sexual favors is just a really dark and complicated part of being female, especially because oftentimes you don’t understand that you feel victimized until after it’s already happened. (Emami 24th February 2017, *Vulture*)

What is also interesting in this remarkable episode is the use of the term *bitch* instead of *slut* since it is dealing with a situation in which Hannah would be called *slut* rather than *bitch* in order to blame her for this kind of abuse happening. *Bitch* and *Slut* are different but slightly similar terms: both are mainly derogatory terms which have been tried to be turned into positive terms which refer to female assertiveness and sexual freedom respectively. However, the politicization of both terms has had its followers and detractors inside diverse feminist groups who directly correlate the use of sexual coercion and assault with the instrumentalization of derogatory language. Previously, in 2011, *SlutWalks* emerged as a form of protest against the use of the term *slut* in order to justify any form of sexual violence against women. The polemic burst forth after the unfortunate commentary made by a police officer at a seminar aimed for advising students on personal safety at York University, in Toronto, Canada: "I've been told I'm not supposed to say this – however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised." (Pilkington 6th May 2011, *The Guardian*) The incendiary statement ran like gunpowder between the female students who were

present at the talk, and they decided to organize a march under the label of *slut* in order to bring attention to the issue. Not shortly after, many other feminist groups joined the initiative at different parts around the world as the cases of young women being raped while heavily intoxicated or just partying, particularly at night times, rise the concern of many women who were worried about their own public safety as well as the prejudice and the stigma that was perpetuated and carried around by official institutions when dealing with such cases. The international success of the movement is since many women were able to come out as rape survivors and to publicly speak about the connection between slut-shaming and sexual violence. It also encouraged many women who were not able to attend the rallies to participate actively online and so to open the debate and discussion about rape culture, victim blaming and slut shaming of the victims of sexual assault.

As a result of this, a new movement was created under the name of *SlutWalks*, to reflect on the nature of rape and how the word *slut* was used by authorities to legitimize such crime. Also, it opened a debate about the nature of women's sexuality, their clothing and how *slut* was still used in a derogatory way. This has become one of

the main concerns of young feminists in the last years, particularly triggered by the proliferation of multiple gang rape cases and their distribution on the net and social media in order to bully, and blame the victim accusing them of being sluts, especially if they were previously involved in parties where alcohol and other substances are consumed, as such it is the case of the well-known Steubenville rape case in 2012. There are other cases of viral rapes who ended up in the suicide of the teen victims after the cyber harassment they suffered by being identified as *sluts*: these are the cases of Rehtaeh Parsons or Audrie Potthe. Also, the recent and numerous cases of gang



NEW YORK MAGAZINE'S COVER WITH EMMA SULKOWICZ (2014)

rape in India, the most well-known of Jyoti Singh Pandey, who was raped and beaten in a public bus in Delhi (2012), and died from the injuries produced during the attack days later. There is also a



MATTRES PERFORMANCE (CARRY THAT WEIGHT) BY EMMA SULKOWICZ (2014)

particularly interesting case which was transformed in a work of resilience performed by former Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz, titled *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*. Initially, she was protesting the Columbia University for not expelling his rapist, who attacked her at her dorm room in 2012 after an initial consensual encounter. The performance consisted on carrying the mattress in which she was raped around the campus as a symbolic act of trauma and resilience, in her words, representing a way of “telling people what happened in that most intimate and private space and bring out into the light.” (1:31-1:33)¹⁷⁴ This performative protest formed part of her senior thesis in summer 2014 while at Yale University Summer School of Art and Music; she carried the mattress until her graduation in May 2015. It is important to point out that Sulkowicz’s art addressed issues about consent, visibility of sexual abuse, victim shaming and trauma, and how the victims are left helpless by the institutions once their report such crimes and how their credibility is put into question, hence perpetrating abuse by protecting the abusers and rapists due to gender prejudices related to sex. Hence, her performance triggered national concern about sexual

¹⁷⁴ Interview to Emma Sulkowicz about *Carry that Weight* (2014): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19hHZbuYVnU>

assault on US campuses as President Obama conformed a national campaign called *It's On Us* to raise awareness and directly address issues on preventing sexual violence at universities and colleges around the country (Smith 21th September 2014, *The New York Times*).

Long before this social awakening, the term *rape culture* was first coined by Margaret Lazarus in her award-winning documentary film of the same name in 1975, in which Lazarus and Wunderlich explored the implications of US sexual fantasies projected onto the culture through different visual and textual forms of media. The medium through which these fantasies were projected was the female body, fetichized, objectified and commodified, through different visual stimulus such as cinema, photography, and other forms of classical arts. As Ana Llorba claims in her essay “The Virgin or the Whore” (“La Virgen o la Puta” originally in Spanish), the female body, in particular the one of young virgins, have been “historically a physical and symbolic territory liable to be penetrated, violated”, a place or “piece of lance where to implant ‘the seed’ to conceive semidivine men” in both Christian and other Mediterranean mythological narratives in relation to religion (Llorba 2017, 55)¹⁷⁵. Previous initiatives promoted by independent feminist organizations around the US attempted to create awareness about and protest against rape culture and domestic violence back in the 70s with marches such as *Take Back the Night*, who also were in favor of illegalizing pornography, considered a form of sexual violence by some of these groups. Part of this discourse against pornography was well-known radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, who stated that the figure of the whore has been employed in order to justify any form of violence, and especially the sexual one, against women, and how the term “consent” have been distorted in order to cover up abuse and violence: blaming the victim by accusing her of actively engaging and participating in the aggression, so the aggression is not such (Dworkin 1981, 206). The core of her arguments is that slut-shaming reinforces its own misogynist logic in order to call raped or abused women ‘sluts’: like saying ‘you got what you deserve’, or ‘you were asking for it (rape).’

With this strategy, this is how rape culture works by taking the aggressor’s responsibility and blame onto the victim, which results into censoring and policing women’s sexual agency in a dual context of public and private relations. One of these constructed policies on women’s bodies is what Valenti has described as the ‘Purity Myth’: a phenomenon of great acceptance in conservative spheres of USA that encourages young women to choose virginity, as well as sexual abstinence, as a form of being sexual. This state of being radically opposed that of the ‘slut’ and reinforces the

¹⁷⁵ El cuerpo de la mujer, y sobre todo de las jóvenes vírgenes, ha sido históricamente el territorio físico y simbólico susceptible de ser penetrado, violentado, la tierra donde enterrar “la semilla” para engendrar hombres semidivinos, tanto en el cristianismo como otras religiones del Mediterráneo. (My translation)

Madonna-Whore complex that has been discussed in the previous section from this chapter. But Valenti also argues that this modern interpretation of this old-fashioned dichotomy also promotes, and even generates, another kind of co-lateral damages that are translated into violence: it establishes who is or is not susceptible 'rapable' and perpetuates this stigma about women's *unworthiness*. Even more, it can change the status of a women's worth if raped: if you are raped, it is because you are a slut, no matter how respectable you were before. The 'Purity Myth' has also been falsely employed as a form to prevent sexual violence when in fact, it only perpetuates it:

Again, all women who suffer under the purity myth are at risk – and the victim-blaming trend is extending far beyond only physical assaults. Women who are harassed – at work, on the street, or even online – are subject to the same rigid purity standards as women who are sexually. Just by virtue of being out in public, we're overstepping certain boundaries. (Valenti 2009, 2339)

Irin Carmon wrote in her radical article 'My Sluthood, Myself' about female promiscuity, sexual violence and social acceptance of what it would categorize as a 'slut': "I'm telling you this because sluthood is scary. Because we've been taught to fear it all our lives, and that training doesn't just go away because we understand the agenda behind it. And because there are real risks involved. Society likes to punish slutty women. And so do a lot of individual men, some of whom frequent Craigslist Casual Encounters." (Carmon 26th July 2010, *Jezebel*) In her testimony, Carmon exposes the intricacies of human desires and social censorship, as well as women's internal conflict between performing her sexuality freely and without boundaries and exposing oneself to scenarios of sexual vulnerability and aggression. Hence, the *SlutWalk* movement has brought into the public debate many discussions about the socio-political dimensions of sexual assault and coercion. But one of the most remarkable ones must be the fact that these mobilizations brought visibility to issues, such as rape, which were highly taken for granted by society as a whole: that sexual violence is employed against women in order to intimidate, shame and control them, as Kaitlynn Mendes argues at her research work on *SlutWalks*, as "an act of power, violence and control" (Mendes 2015, 91). In fact, rape intersects with other forms of oppression against women in most contemporary societies globally, especially encouraged by how experiences of sexual violence depicted throughout the web offer an alternative vision on this topic:

These were the types of post which went beyond merely *stating* that rape is not a crime of passion or sex, but which *explained*, sometimes using the authors' personal experiences, the ways in which it is fueled by power, domination and control. These were the posts that explained the ways in which victim-blaming perpetuated sexual violence, and the ones that debunked rape myths." (Mendes 2015, 111)

Also, Tanenbaum herself, despite her objections towards the attempts of re-appropriation of the term ‘slut’ by the movement, acknowledges “the genius of the movement – the reason it caught fire immediately – was that it finessed the paradox of women’s being sexual without being objects while also connecting this paradox with sexual violence.” (Tanenbaum 2015, 262). Despite being accused of *pornifying protest* by the explicit use of sexualized bodies and performing normative assumptions of what a ‘slut-looks-like’, other critics, such as Ringrose & Renold, have defended the *SlutWalk*’s achievement, such as “push(ing) the gaze off the dress and behavior of the victim of sexual violence back upon the perpetrator, questioning the normalization and legitimisation of male sexual aggression” (Ringrose & Renold 2012, 334) even to the point of becoming a “political category of unity” by “challeng(ing) sexual rivalry between women” (Ringrose & Renold 2012, 335) They also argued that the appropriation of the slur *slut* opens up a heated discussion about the possibilities of re-inventing the term as an “abject signifier drowns out the possibilities of organized resistance.” (Ringrose & Renold 2012, 340) Therefore, *SlutWalks* have helped many women to question their prejudices about other women’s sexual performances as well as to identify the circumstances through which sexual violence is justified, and even legitimized, by the power structures of inequality and the restrictions for freedom between men and women around the world.

5.2.3. F*ck me!: the ravishing poetics of *Alt [C]Lit*

Poetry has been also a medium through which many female artists have narrated these experiences of sexual abuse, either personal or not, to provide a different perspective on this issue. Employing the first-person voice of the victim, some *Alt [C]Lit* poets have written about sexual violence without fetishizing neither the victim nor the abuser. Broder’s re-writing of Nabokov’s world-famous *Lolita* in the poem “30th Edition”¹⁷⁶ in *Meat Heart* (2012) offers a new reading that satirizes the main themes of the novel, which recently other *Alt Lit* authors have rewritten Nabokov’s book into contemporary terms, such are the cases of Tao Lin’s *Richard Yates* (2010) and Ben Brooks’ *Lolito* (2014). Nabokov’s novel is regarded as one of the greatest novels of the 20th century literature as well as one of the most controversial ones due to Humbert’s status as an unreliable narrator and the hebephilia implied in his relationship with the character of Lolita. In the first lines, the speaker of Broder’s poem fantasizes about recreating the plot of *Lolita*, in which she will perform the role of the nymphet and choses her “old English teacher” in the role of Humbert. The nymphet is a term used to describe a sexually attractive girl or young woman, and in Nabokov’s

¹⁷⁶ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 309](#).

book, a girl around 9 and 14 years old. But, as the speaker of Broder's poem confesses, maybe she will not fulfill this age requirement because "I'm not enough gangly bones" (Broder 2014, 64). This can be interpreted as a commentary about the body of a pre-pubescent girl as tall and lanky, not totally mature, crossing between the boundaries of having childish features morphing into a sexually curved body of a mature woman. This term is defined by Humbert in Nabokov's book in the following terms:

Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets.'

It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see 'nine' and 'fourteen' as the boundaries—the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks—of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. (Nabokov 2012, 12)

This perverse vision on the female body also coincides with a trend followed by diverse media on the representation of the female body as youthful as possible, even surfacing an infantilized look that sexualizes the forms of the prepubescent female body. The infantilization of the female body has become a fetish especially in porn culture, like the wide-spread 'Lolita' fashion in Japan. The association between innocence, purity and lack of sexual awareness attracts many men because of the control they can potentially exert over vulnerable and submissive infantilized young



LOLITA FASHION STYLE IN JAPAN.

women, who in most cases, are unable to recognize and confront such abuse of power. The nymphet's sexual submission is represented in the poem in the next lines:

The rule is
He must burrow in my convex
While I coldly
Call him fruithead.
An extra milk molecule
Tips. (Broder 2012, 64)

The sex scene described above is one in which the woman is under the control of the man's sexual domination, suggesting that the 'missionary' position provides the man total control of his penetration, which is described as "burrow in my convex" (Broder 2012, 64), like a shovel digging

into the ground. The male orgasm is represented as “an extra milk molecule tips” (Broder 2012, 64), dropping semen from the tip of his penis. On the other hand, the line “somebody forgot to freeze me” (Broder 2012, 64) shows an obsession with the passing of time: how she would have liked to prevent the changing transformations leading her body into female adulthood during the adolescence; the hormonal changes that affects the body and transforms her into “a fat fish”. The “fish” is symbol of femininity and fertility, which suggests the image of a body of full breasts and hips ready for her sexual maturity and procreative fulfillment. In contrast to this “fat fish,” the “cork dry” symbolizes the lightness of the young body, who hasn’t already grown its feminine physical traits. Broder also states female sexual arousal to be different from that of “nymphets,” because they “don’t vibrate in their bobby socks,” reinforcing this impression of “nymphets” as passive sexual beings. “Bobby socks” are a type of socks that were especially fashionable during the 1940s and 1950s, worn by girls as part of their school uniform.



BOBBY SOCKS (C. 1940'S)

In the closing lines, the roles seem to be slowly changing, and the speaker leaves behind her insecure image to develop a stronger and more assertive voice. She refuses to be infantilized in order to be desired, and even expresses a sense of hatred and need for revenge: regretting the “dolly”, which a girl’s typical toy, she wants “to buy weaponry” (Broder 2012, 65) whenever she reaches the “legal” age in order to buy some, which is 21 in the USA. Then, in a final twist, the speaker claims that, instead of being the passive Lolita, she would like to be “Humbert”: something that she previously expresses her preference of “weaponry” on the “dolly”, and which clearly exemplifies the ambivalence of gendered power. Also, in order to express her sexual desire freely, the speaker has to transformed herself into the man, in order to be in control of both her body and her desire. This transformation can be interpreted from the line “what I do with my torso” (Broder 2012 65), the “torso” symbolizing the chest area in which a feminine and masculine body is defined in terms of how bulky that area of the human anatomy is.

Another poem that also uses the ‘Lolita’ trope to speak about sexual assault and girlhood is Mira Gonzalez’s “when I die you can have my heart-shaped sunglasses”¹⁷⁷ (2013). The poem’s title is an explicit reference to Marilyn Manson’ song “Heart-Shaped Glasses (When the Heart Guides

¹⁷⁷ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 323](#).

the Hand)”¹⁷⁸, in which Manson’s then-girlfriend, actress Evan Rachel Wood, appears wearing a heart-shaped glasses at the video clip, and where they have simulated sex and scenes of her being covered in blood. According to Manson, the song was inspired by the reading of Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Wood’s showing up to visit him once wearing heart-shaped glasses. These glasses are reminiscence of famous Kubrick’s poster film in 1962, which made a frivolous representation of Nabokov’s famous character by explicitly depicting male sexual fantasies and objectifying young girls as submissive



EVAN RACHEL WOOD IN MARILYN MANSON’S VIDEOCLIP FOR *HEART-SHAPED GLASSES (WHEN THE HEART GUIDES THE HAND)* (2013)



LOLITA BY STANLEY KUBRICK (1962)

and sexually provocative. In this sense, Gonzalez’s poem speaks about *Trainer’s The*

Lolita Complex or *Lolicon* [a Japanese pornographic media focusing on the attraction to young or prepubescent girls, better known as ‘Loli’(s) which is the eroticized representation of cute young girls by an adult man, and emphasizes the aesthetics and fashion related to an idealized portrayal of girlhood rather than an accurate one]. This makes it difficult to discern the thin line between fetishism, eroticism and pedophilia. In any case, Gonzalez is inspired by this paraphilia in order to express the complexity of sexual attraction and desire, and the projections of those desires

onto the women’s affective experiences without discerning between being sexual or enduring emotional abuse by the projection of those fetishized idealizations. This is depicted in the first introductory lines:

I can feel your age
on top of me, looking down at me
sitting next to me and feeling calm
about this massive empty space (Gonzalez 2013, 36)

It is especially relevant when the speaker emphasizes “I can feel your age on top of me”, in which one can perceive the sexual connotations and implications of this expression, as an oppressive weight that even goes with her even when he is not physically present (“this massive

¹⁷⁸ Marilyn Manson’s “Heart-Shaped Glasses (When the Heart Guides the Hand)” videoclip (2007): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvfIDMDTosk>

empty space”) (Gonzalez 2013, 36). In the following lines, Gonzalez introduces the ‘Electra complex’ in order to justify her difficulties in engaging sexually and emotionally with other people: “they told me that trust versus mistrust is the primary psychological dilemma of early childhood” (Gonzalez 2013, 36). Basically, this means that the confidence and self-esteem of a person is determined by the early years of childhood, especially by establishing an affective relationship that implies nurture and trust with parental figures. In this case, the absence or lack of contact with the fatherly figure can influence the way people interact with each other, particularly in establishing strong affective bonds. This poem seems related to another of Gonzalez’s poems, “5 years old”¹⁷⁹, when one reads the following lines:

I was six years old when I observed you hugging me from a
conceptual distance
only later could I understand the permanency of rejection
‘nobody’s fault really’ (Gonzalez 2013, 33)

In these lines, Gonzalez seems to ironically blame her father or another male adult figure for her distant, detached and cold attitude towards men. In the poem “5 years old”, there are more instances of this early-childhood memories in relation to traumatic experiences about physical touch and, apparently, sexual abuse:

he is embracing me
not a hug, not really
he is kneeling and I am standing
we are the same height this way

over his shoulder I can see marble stairs
I feel confused or afraid
he gives me a teddy bear (Gonzalez 2013, 33)

The rest of the poem stands as a metaphor for how the voice of the poem feels towards her anonymous male figure, which is depicted as a distant presence or someone whom the speaker does not have a strong emotional attachment with. These lines provide some information about the identity of this person, like for example that this person is much taller than her or that he was more affectionate towards her because she passively receives his embrace rather than corresponding him more actively with a hug. Then, we also get to know that his economic status is higher than her because “over his shoulder I can see marble stairs” and also “he gives me a teddy bear” (Gonzalez 2013, 22): the “teddy bear” standing as symbol of material affection for the child. Also, the comforting gestures of the adult in this extract can be interpreted as an attempt to buy the child’s

¹⁷⁹ The complete poem can be found in the [Appendix 2, page 314](#).

trust and affection. Despite these displays of affections, her reactions to these apparently well-intentioned gestures are of confusion and fear: “I feel confused or afraid” (Gonzalez 2013, 33). This seems to suggest that she does not know how she is supposed to react to these sudden displays of affection towards her, so her reaction is of immediate distrust of him, and a particularly evident rejection from her part described in the closing lines of the poem as it follows: “I leave the teddy bear in a park / I tell my mom I did it on purpose.” (Gonzalez 2013, 33) One can interpret the vulnerable position of the child and her passivity as the typical behavior of abused children, especially those ones sexually abused.

Back to the previous poem, the following lines of “when I die you can have my heart-shaped sunglasses” (Gonzalez 2013, 36) are quite disturbing, since they seem apparently disjointed in



FKA TWIGS IN *PAPI PACIFY* (2013)

content and meaning from the previous part of the poem. The tone becomes more obscure by making explicit allusions to trauma and abuse from the past due to a hint made about conscious loss of memory at the following lines: “I watched you fall through layers of fabric that day / I watched you speak in unintentional rhyme / and I allowed morbid details / to claim empty space in

my head” (Gonzalez 2013, 36). This sense of abstraction continues when Gonzalez uses synesthesia in order to describe memories about that specific night: “do you remember that night / when I touched the bottom of the ocean with my tongue/ when I felt inadequacy in my spinal column / and valued your quiet existence” (Gonzalez 2013, 36). The image of the taste (“tongue”) touching “the bottom of the ocean”, the “spinal column” feeling “inadequacy” and valuing “your quiet existence” are metaphors used to describe how the brain would process sensorial information through the different sensory systems of the body. Afterwards, Gonzalez concludes the poem with an overtly sexual scene that reminds that one of FKA



LANA DEL REY IN *BLUE JEANS* (2012)

Twigs’ video clip for *Papi Pacify*¹⁸⁰ or Lana del Rey’s *Blue Jeans*¹⁸¹. Both artists present the sexual

¹⁸⁰ FKA Twigs’s *Papi Pacify* videoclip (2013): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OydK91JjFOw>

¹⁸¹ Lana del Rey’s *Blue Jeans* videoclip (2012): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRWox-i6aAk>

act of submission and dominance by using the allegory of two male fingers penetrating their mouths as a symbolic way to represent the coitus or a fellatio, as Gonzalez does in the next lines: “now can you understand / a person’s hand pushing on my face / and his fingers in my mouth” (Gonzalez 2013, 36). As it shows the sexually violence of imagery implied in this act, there is this depiction of female passivity versus male assertiveness performing by and over the female body, which is open to submit itself to male fantasies and desires. To conclude the poem, Gonzalez states that “this is understood to be the defining element of emerging adulthood”: this may refer to the loss of innocence and the coming of adulthood, represented as the sexual awakening and awareness of a young woman, connecting her early memories about an abusive male figure to her later relationships with other men.

As it has been shown, *Alt [C]lit* poets have illustrated through poetry the complexities of female sexuality and its socio-cultural implications in a contemporary context, including that harsh reality of common, and even daily, sexual violence. By inhabiting a world that is more digitalized everyday, these authors are capturing through their texts the complexities of human sexuality and the paradoxes of women’s sexual agency in contemporary US society. They have illustrated the complex, and even sometimes, dangerous boundaries between sexual awareness, assertiveness, oppression and abuse without putting themselves from a victim position: from the *slut* to the display of a *lolita* complex, these authors explore, unashamed and bold, the intricacies of sex in contemporary terms, where taboos and abjection intermingles with freedom of choice and transgression. Navigating a world full of constraining contradictions and options for liberty, *Alt [C]* poets like Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete and Gonzalez, among many others who have not been mentioned or analyzed in depth at the present thesis, have challenged traditional notions and visions on gender, alienation, mental health, the body, sexuality, and most importantly, women’s writing, by actively engaging with new trends related to a world transitioning from the analogical to the digital, aware of the circumstances, and also paradoxical, conditions that surrounds them as part of the Millennial generation, as well as the future of society, and humanity, of the world wide world.

Conclusion

Returning to the inquiry I proposed at the beginning of this research thesis, I may claim now that the *Alt [C]Lit* is conformed by the poets Sarah Jean Alexander, Gabby Bess, Melissa Broder, Ana Carrete, and Mira Gonzalez and belong to a generation of digital poets that also belong to a literary genealogy in the USA. Departing from what is understood as Internet Culture, these *Alt [C]Lit* authors share a series of aesthetic characteristics, which are:

language use;

common topics such as alienation, loneliness, sexuality, affectivity and social performance;

the difference between the real person and the author is also mediated by the creation of an Internet persona, instead of a literary one, opening up to the multiplicity of subjectivities displayed by gender, race, and the difference between East and West coasts in the USA;

and the way the new purpose for writing has become a medium through which to react to a particular socio-cultural context, that is also reflected on a preference for publishing first online and later on print.

Literature's presentation has changed due to the new paradigms introduced by these authors: despite the initial criticism about whether *Alt [C]Lit* literature was originated in the Internet, as well as other artistic expressions, it should be considered a form of art. These new forms of online are happening whether we like them or not, whether we consider them true art or not. They are still there, are widely read, and keep circulating to an increasing, and countless, number of readerships, that is simultaneously, and on their own accord producing, compulsively typing on their computers keyboards, freely publishing at their blogs and other websites. I want to point out that *Alt [C]Lit* poetry is more than art: it is a cultural manifestation of a group that conform a globally and online oriented society. This cultural manifestation initiated by the Millennials, who rely more on the virtual rather than on material platforms, and who are configuring new ways of understanding and interacting with reality from a digital perspective. Therefore, I consider the liminal aspect of their poetry when approaching them, aware that they are rapidly changing and adapting to current times. If we do not consider the influence of technology and digital media over literature, we will ignore and miss out, a phenomenon that is larger than the one traditional academic standards, and, furthermore, old-fashioned artistic and cultural snobbery of the canon.

Since 2014, when I started my thesis, technological advances have radically transformed our lives and ways of conceiving knowledge. As one can directly check, many links with key information have disappeared without leaving any trace: a paradox that years or even centuries

before would have been compared to the devastating effects of a fire in a library or an archive. The rapid changes, as well as the unstable and unpredictable nature of the *Alt [C]Lit*, are reflected on how this thesis has been mutating. Initially, I had a wider sample of authors, but the more I read and analyzed them, the more I realized that the definitive five ones that lasted until finishing the thesis were the ones who were more representative, as well as more similar, thematically and stylistically. Initially, I considered to include authors such as Ariana Reines, Patricia Lockwood, Dorothea Lasky and the now very popular Rupi Kaur. However, I found out that Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete and Gonzalez were closer in many aspects, from the personal connections displayed between them at social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or *Instagram* to the work relationships they had established through their active collaboration through online literary magazines such as *Illuminate Girl Bang*.

Currently, from of all members of this *Alt [C]Lit* group, only Melissa Broder continues publishing her literary works while being active on her two *Twitter* accounts. Ana Carrete is still active in her private *Instagram* account, self-publishing and re-reprinting her poetry zines, while occasionally participating at some poetry slams around Los Angeles area, whilst working as a Spanish teacher in primary schools. Mira Gonzalez is still active in *Twitter*, but does not seem to have the impact she had years before, especially when she was more involved in the literary scene. Gabby Bess occasionally reappears on *Instagram*, and the last update indicated that she was trying to pursue a career as a sexual worker while exploring her more mystic side through tarot reading and ritual making. And Sarah Jean Alexander republished *Wild Lives* in 2018, got married and seems to work as an article writer for some online magazines while being occasionally active on *Instagram*, especially when she got married to her long-term partner and documented their honeymoon traveling around Italy. It seems that after 2015, all five authors, except Broder, have not been active in pursuing their literary careers and have turned towards other options outside the artistic realm. When I was in New York, in 2016, I tried to contact them, but I did not receive any reply as a result of most of them were changing their careers.

When I originally selected them, back in the summer of 2014, I chose them purely by chance, or rather by random luck, as everything at the Internet usually happens. While I was considering the topic for my PhD research, I found an article written by Spanish poet Luna Miguel in online cultural magazine *Playground* about a group of US writers and poets, known as the *Alt Lit*, and link after link, click after click, I read a series of articles that drove me towards surfing the net searching for the author's poems she mentioned and their published works. I slowly conformed a massive piece of digital patchwork made out of mixed books and ebooks, chapbooks, zines, online

texts and magazines, webpages, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *Tumblr* accounts, where I was sneaking, and gathering, any relevant piece of information to justify my initial interest, and even attraction, for the work of these authors. Then, in the autumn of 2014, when I finally entered the Doctoral program, the controversy of the *Alt Lit* rape and sexual harassment allegations and articles started to appear every time I googled them. That was the very moment I decided that I had to focus on the female artists, especially after reading the ‘no boys allowed’ manifesto, which I fully quoted in Chapter One.

I have been always biased about gender politics, and my readings are highly influenced by a feminist approach, what my thesis tutor Julia Salmerón calls “to look with the *violet glasses on*”: I cannot take off for I would not be able to see as clearly as I do whenever I wear them. Throughout the writing of this thesis, I became more aware of the importance of researching the voices of women writers and artists to include them in the canon, so in the future we may teach them to inspire the future generations. During my formative years at both the bachelor and master’s degrees: and thanks to the feminist professors and academics I encountered throughout the different classes and seminars I took, I was inspired to read more women’s literature until they became the only kind of literature I radically consume. This way, I identified with their writing, their topics, their concerns; every piece of text and art I encountered spoke volumes to my self as a woman in a man’s world. This way of identification with *Alt [C]Lit* authors such as Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete, and Gonzalez helped me to navigate my own experiences: experiences which were alien to me at the beginning, but once I started to navigate life, specially after spending time in New York as part of an international exchange program, they began to grow deeper in me, and I was finally able to find out why I was attracted to their work in the first place. My thesis does not only reflect my interest in poetry, the Internet, or art. I actively consume at my *Instagram* feed daily, psychology, sociology, and history. It also reflects the curiosity and worries of a whole generation through a series of trends constantly displayed and changing at our social media, the new media that is educating and culturally feeding the youth.

For me, this Thesis of mine has not only been an academic project, a level to step up in my academic career, an important element in my professional CV: it has been a journey full of personal growth, of new experiences and personal encounters; a path through which to learn retrospectively who I am as a Millennial woman in her late 20s and early 30s, a precarious working English teacher, an aspiring feminist academic, a (hopefully) future university professor of literature, a secretly amateur writer. Through the topics I have explored in the previous five chapters, I have been able to explore my concerns about my own identity issues, which are spoken

through the diverse voices of Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete, Gonzalez and the other Millennial, and not that new, artists I have mentioned, analyzed and commented upon. These texts, these images, these illustrations, these photographs, these videos, these series, these movies, these pieces of art, these *tweets*, these essays represent a whole generation,. As I have strongly emphasized before: I am also part of that generation. I am a Millennial, and so my thesis (her)self.

If there is a *motto* I actually believe in is that the personal is always political: the I older I become, the more aware I become about the truth of this statement. Once one starts getting to know oneself and take a chance to look around, and sees how one situates herself in the world, then something magically clicks in one's mind: everything makes sense. The way one sees oneself as others may see them as well, the way one feels as other may (try to) understand what one feels. Everything is reciprocal and mimics creating a loop, a constant feed of interactions that affects and shapes us in a mutually inclusive and exclusive way. Pulling and pushing forces constantly conditions the manners in which we relate to each other, whether those ones are materialized, embodied or influenced by diverse technologies. Throughout this journey, I learnt how to get to know myself, to hate myself, to discard myself, to change myself, to transform myself, to experiment with myself, to lose myself, and to finally meet me again. The readings I made throughout these long years have shaped the way I think but also the manner in which I feel. Like many other of my PhD students, I have confronted the stress, the angst and the joys of such an extensive project that has affected me in such ways that will remain with me not only for the rest of my academic life, but also at a personal level. My thesis became my enemy at some points, making me question if all this effort and work was really worth considering the desolating panorama we encounter as adults and young professionals, the market and the Academia itself which still resist drastic changes for everybody's benefit but themselves. It also became my remedy for my anxiety and depression: I read through these authors my own fears and longings, and made me realize that the reasonings I was providing to the analysis of their works were also speaking to my current situation, to the very core of my self. It made me realize what I really wanted in my life once I lost all hope and credibility on my self.

I do not want to claim that I got all the answers, especially considering the evasive nature of the topics and texts I have been thoroughly working on. I would rather claim that I got to know better about my own concerns and identity as well as where I am going now at this point. We are currently living in a crisis, and usually the word crisis has negative connotations and effects when used in social and other informational media. Whenever someone hears the word 'crisis' it seems there is something to worry about, in a bad sense. But etymologically, the original meaning of the

word comes from the Ancient Greek noun *krisis*, derived from the verb *krinein*, which means ‘to decide’. Therefore, this pandemic crisis can be defined as a ‘decisive point or moment in life’, that can turn for either good or bad depending on the decision one takes at the very present: it is more of an opportunity, rather than a paralyzing, destructive, or apocalyptic situation., a dead end in the literal sense. Whether that decision is good or bad is purely subjective, as it is the opinion of the reader about the present thesis, and even the artistic and literary value of the *Alt [C]Lit* poets presented here.

What I expect to establish by presenting this research to the academia is to contribute to the development of a genealogy that is primarily focused on women’s literature, in this case throwing some light on these contemporary artists, who are already rare and difficult to access to, due to their gender, class and/or race. Also, since the success of their work is purely identified as underground, even marginal, outside of both the canon and the mainstream, I would like to call the readers’ attention to a kind of literature that they are not used or initially attracted to. By presenting these unusual authors, I expect to encourage other researchers into diving deeper inside the *Alt [C]Lit*, and other trends to come, to find new voices and represent them, no matter what other researchers may think of their artistic or literary value. I want to believe that culture is more than what is accepted by the institutions, by the general public, by our own personal preferences. It takes courage to take the alternative road and explore into the unknown, and that what is the Internet is about, with its limitlessness, endless networks and gates that open to explore other options: let’s see what is to come in this future, a time of speed and multiplicities, as well of possibilities.

Traducciones al español de Introducción y Conclusiones

Introducción

En 1991, el colectivo de artistas feminist *VNS Matrix* enunciaron que “el clitoris es la línea directa a la matriz” en *el Manifiesto Ciberfeminista para el siglo XXI*. Al hacer esta declaración en los noventa, el colectivo proclamó que la tecnología, en particular aquella relacionada con la simulación, lo digital y virtual, ofrecía a las mujeres una nueva escena para reinventarse en diferentes maneras: que el hombre posmoderno empezaba a ser una posible y alternativa forma de liberación de la crisis posmoderno para así reescribir no solo lo que un humana podría ser, si no para también reinventar el género a través de los interminables y fructíferos terrenos online para la proliferación de la imaginación. Cambios frenéticos se acontecieron en las siguientes dos décadas, tan veloces como la rapidez con que un virus viaja a través del espacio y el tiempo para infectar un nuevo sistema informático: acechando en un nuestras vidas cotidianas, reconfigurado nuestras rutinas, colándose a través de las pantallas de nuestros ordenadores, cegándonos con toda su esplendorosa hiper(ir)realidad, fascinándonos con su infinito desplazamiento de novedades que borran los límites entre realidad y virtualidad.

Poco eran conscientes de que trece años después, en 2014, Emma Rae emplearía la abreviatura de “[C]lit” para calificar a un grupo de escritoras que pertenecía a una comunidad más amplia de artistas conocidos previamente como la *Alt Lit*. Es más, la palabra “click” suena de manera similar a “clit,” debido a que los sonidos /k/ (velar) y la /t/ (alveolar) en inglés son plosives mudas cuyos lugares de articulación se producen al situar la lengua en el velo del paladar, en el mismo inicio de la garganta (velar), y en el arco alveolar, justo detrás de la dentadura (alveolar). Esta sutil diferencia hace que la combinación de ambas palabras conformen una ingeniosa aliteración que fusiona ambos términos como si éstos fueran el mismo: [C]lit se refiere simultáneamente a ‘[c]lick,’ ‘[c]litoris,’ y ‘[c]literature.’ La omisión o presencia de la [C] marca la difference entre ‘click’ y ‘lick’ (‘chupar’ en inglés), ‘literatura’ y ‘cliteratura,’ ya que esta última representa un término usado durante los 70’s que se usaba de manera despectiva para referirse a la literatura producida por mujeres. Pero también la [C] por si sola significa muchas otras cosas: el comando informático [Ctrl + C] para copiar en un escrito; © como símbolo de derechos de autor; [C] de computadora, ciborg, cultura, centro (entendido como la matriz a la que *VNS* se refieren en su manifiesto), conectividad/conectar(se) ... La naturaleza sugerente de esta letra interpretado en este contexto digital puede ser evocativamente infinito, contribuyendo a la riqueza de variedad de significados tal y como esta tesis es propensa a inducir. Parece ser que debido a estas representaciones la consigna ‘cliquea(ndo) mi clit’ está implícito en el acrónimo abreviado que

conforma *Alt [C]Lit*, el cual reclama visibilidad a una parte de la anatomía de la mujer que ha sido deliberadamente censurada, omitidas e incluso borrada de la memoria cultural de la (his)toria¹⁸² de la humanidad, debido a la sistemática opresión patriarcal de la mujer en la mayor parte del mundo. Originalmente, el término ‘click’ se refería a un sonido parecido a un chasquido sordo, que recuerda al sutil chasquido que hace del ratón del ordenador cuando se selecciona algo en la pantalla del ordenador. De igual manera, el ‘clit(oris)’ produce agudos sonidos orgánicos una vez que se localiza y estimula de la manera adecuada. ¿Sería ahora el momento para reclamar la [c]literatura a través de la inclusión de las autoras de la *Alt [C]Lit* como parte de un nuevo paradigma de escrituras femenina? ¿Es la *Alt [C]Lit* la personificación definida de la poética por la que la agencia sobre los cuerpos y sexualidades de las mujeres es abiertamente, públicamente y explícitamente hablada y representada, sin remordimiento ni vergüenza?

Esta tesis, “*Alt [C]Lit: la poética Millennial de la cibercultura en los EEUU*”, explora las genealogías culturales y artísticas de la literatura y el feminismo para así explicar la posición paradójica de la juventud Millennial comes (des)conectada del encanto de las fantasmagóricas luces de las pantallas, dentro de la soledad de sus habitaciones ocupadas, alineados de las sociedades urbanas, atrapados dentro de la red informática mundial¹⁸³. Por ello, el objetivo de esta tesis es identificar en qué maneras la *Alt [C]Lit* constituye una generación de jóvenes autoras innovadora, literaria y alternativa que se apropian del lenguaje en red cotidiano como practica y de los espacios virtuales para hacer escuchar sus voces como creadoras dentro de la escena literaria actual a través de la experimentación, el posición política feminista y haciendo visibles temas que afectan a la generación Millennial. Para probar esta hipótesis, me gustaría establecer una serie de genealogías dentro de los ámbitos de la literatura, lo social, la cultura y económicos desde los cuales la generación Millennial vienen y pertenecen. Las poetisas que he seleccionado Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete y Gonzalez, son nativas norteamericanas que viven principalmente en las áreas cercanas a Nueva York y Los Angeles, nacieron entre principios de los 80’s y los 90’s, y cuya producción literaria principal se produjo durante el 2010 y el 2016.

En este sentido, como investigadora, concibo este movimiento literario como una generación ya que el trabajo de estas autoras comparten una serie de temas comunes, característicos y recurrentes, los cuales también están relacionados con lo que los sociólogos han identificado como la Generación Y o Millennials. Me gustaría continuar aplicando esta noción de generación

¹⁸² (His)tory: entendido como la historia de los varones a través del posesivo masculino ‘his’ en inglés)

¹⁸³ Red informática mundial conocida en inglés como ‘World Wide Web.’

para así justificar mi selección de autoras pertenecientes a la comunidad *Alt Lit* y constituir un nuevo grupo que comparta la misma visión sobre la creación y la producción literaria que se origina desde la experiencia vivida común a través de una serie de eventos que están distintivamente marcados por las experiencias de este grupo generacional en los Estados Unidos de America nacidos entre principios de los 80's y principios de los 2000's, las cuales son: la crisis financiera del 2007-2008, la Gran Recesión, la democratización del uso de Internet, la proliferación de nuevas redes sociales, y el consumo masivo de smartphones y ordenadores personales como avances tecnológicos que han cambiado radicalmente las relaciones sociales. Por lo tanto, la naturaleza de este trabajo puede enmarcarse dentro del estudio de los parámetros socioculturales que emplean los métodos de análisis de la historia cultural, y cuyo material de estudio es la literatura, y más concretamente, la poesía, y así describir de manera más extensa los fenómenos y contextos generacionales.

La tesis ha sido estructurada teniendo en cuenta que la poesía *Alt [C]Lit* es un fenómeno relativamente desconocido, especialmente dentro del ámbito académico. Después de una investigación exhaustiva, he descubierto que a la hora de presentar mis hallazgos, tenía que considerar el escaso, e incluso no existente, conocimiento sobre las autoras presentadas. También, para poder defender mi posición sobre considerar a Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete y Gonzalez como parte del mismo grupo de artistas, la cual denomino como generación literaria Millennial de autoras, he dividido este trabajo en capítulos que están identificados en cinco grandes bloques temáticos: los antecedentes históricos y literarios; las genealogías de la escritura online de mujeres; soledad y depresión en poetas Millennial; la sexualidad de la mujer y su representación en los nuevos medios digitales; el complejo de la virgen y la prostituta y la violencia sexual en la poesía de mujeres.

En el 'capítulo 1. ¿Qué es la *Alt Lit*?', hablaré sobre la manera en la que la comunidad *Alt Lit* puede ser enmarcada dentro de la historia de la literatura contemporánea. En medio de una crisis que abarca al ámbito del conocimiento humanístico, los estudios digitales han emergido como una respuesta para analizar y teorizar el impacto que tiene la tecnología, y, particularmente, los avances de la realidad virtual y el rol de los medios de comunicación online que tienen en la sociedad y en nuestras vidas cotidianas. La literatura *Alt Lit* procede de un punto crítico liminal entre lo digital, electrónico, la literatura y la escena avant-garde literaria en la que Internet y los lectores digitalizados representan una nueva transición hacia nuevos modos de creación y publicación fuera de los canales tradicionales y convencionales de la cultura. Desde su casual nombramiento por un usuario anónimo en Internet, quien creó las cuentas de *Alt Lit Gossip Tumblr* y *Twitter* en 2011, la

comunidad *Alt Lit* emergió como un movimiento cultural que reaccionaba contra las obras literarias creadas durante los 90's y principios de los 2000's. Sus valores de base orbital entorno la cultura de la colectividad y la interactividad ofrecidas por las plataformas digitales de red de contactos, que también les permiten la auto-publicación y la auto-promoción. En combinación con el desarrollo de un lenguaje en Internet, constituido por emoticonos y memes, esta dinámica refuerza una aparente inmadurez y aproximación desenfadada a diversos temas, como el uso de drogas, el sexo o el sentimiento de alienación expresados a través de un prisma nihilista y decadente.

En el 'capítulo 2. Las (vo)ces de una Geno-ración: (en)vivo de la escritura *Alt [C]Lit*' (The (voi)ces of a Girl-eration: (@)LiVe of *Alt [C]Lit* writing), analizo las implicaciones de la hipercomunicación y la escritura *Alt [C]Lit* como fenómenos paralelos que puede ser rastreados a través de la historia universal de la literatura escrita por mujeres. Datando desde tiempos de la antigüedad de las Diosas y Deidades relacionadas con las tareas de hilar, tejer, bordar, de retazos y hacer colchas, estos medios tradicionales que representan las destrezas que fueron, y aún son, asociadas a las mujeres, son formas bien conocidas por su potencial como narración así como transmisores de información y patrimonio cultural. Hoy en día, el flujo de información continua recordándonos a este flujo de nudos interconectados: produciendo a la vez que consumiendo, lo que Zafra denomina *prosumir*, or sobreexponerse a través de Twitter mientras que uno se esconde y se aísla en el anonimato de su cuarto. Embebida en la cultura digital, las prácticas de la escritura de mujeres ha evolucionado hacia las plataformas de transmisión pública las cuales han sido abiertamente permitidas la exposición de sus intimidades a través de la ilusoria seguridad de las pantallas de ordenador, y a veces, del anonimato ofrecido por el uso de avatares y del alter ego online. Estableciendo una genealogía de redes entrelazadas por el pasado y el presente, las poetas y escritoras de la *Alt [C]Lit*, como Megan Boyle, Mira Gonzalez, Melissa Broder, Gabby Bess y Ana Carrete, se convierten en el mismo futuro de producción de textos y otras creaciones artísticas. Como los telares mecánicos y las tarjetas perforadas ayudaron a las tejedoras a enhebrar los hilos, las máquinas de escribir y ahora los ordenadores van un paso más allá a la hora de conectar algo más que palabras: los sistemas informáticos también establecen redes entre escritores y usuarios que, a cambio, los mantienen conectados en la red infinita, aquellas de la Red Informática Mundial (World Wide Web), o como es mejor conocida como Internet, como una tela de araña gigantesca que atrapa a sus presas: debido a esto, la sobreproducción de trabajos textuales efímeros y la importancia de la performatividad social online condicionan los trabajos y vidas de estas autoras como mujeres Millennial.

En el ‘capítulo 3. Almas Solitariamente-Narcisistas: los Inta-Gramos de Auto-reparación’ (LØnely-Narcissist S0vl(s): the Instant-gram(\$) of Self(ie)-reparation), hablo sobre cómo el individualismo radical y lo digital han influenciado la manera en la que los Millennial se han configurado como una generación conformada por una masa unificada de individuos. El acto de la escritura, ejecutado a través de Internet y otras redes sociales, se convierte en el paradigma que unifica la conectividad social y la soledad: una juventud Millennial que compulsivamente teclea y chatea a través de sus ordenadores personales y sus teléfonos móviles dentro de la seguridad de los cómodos espacios de sus habitaciones. A pesar de las mejoras producidas por la aparición de nuevas tecnologías que nos hacen estar más conectados, la verdad es que la gente pierde la íntima materialidad de la reciprocidad de las relaciones la cual lo virtual es incapaz de transmitir. La ansiedad social que es retratada por las poetas Alt [C]lit como Sarah Jean Alexander, quien escribe sobre fatiga existencial y el aislamiento digital, y Mira Gonzalez, quien explora la torpeza y el distanciamiento social como una inhabilidad para conectar con otros. Por otra parte, en un contexto donde la felicidad y el bienestar general son promocionados a través de varias plataformas de redes sociales, como Instagram y YouTube, analizaré cómo esto afecta a la estabilidad emocional e incluso potencialmente promueve un incremento en el desarrollo de algunas patologías mentales como la ansiedad, la paranoia y la depresión. Siguiendo el concepto de introyección de Melanie Klein de su *Teoría de la Relación de Objeto*, pudiera identificar las diferentes maneras en las que cada poeta Alt [C]Lit use este proceso como medio para aliviar este sentimiento de soledad: para Alexander y Carrete, la ingestión de comida se convierten en una forma de crear vínculos afectivos con otros de manera virtual, mientras que para Broder y Gonzalez está más relacionado con el hecho de batallar con la distrofia corporal. En términos del uso de medicamento, tanto para Bess como para Gonzalez lo emplean como una forma de lidiar con la disociación y la paranoia una vez los estados depresivos y de ansiedad superan su pavor existencial.

En ‘el capítulo 4. Informátiexs y Dominatrix: los Yo[es] + las intimidaciones expuestas’ (Inf0rm@tic\$ & D0mi(m)atriX: I[y]es + intimac(ies) 3xposs3d), debato sobre cómo la condición del individuo hypermodern bajo el dominio tecnológico es caracterizado por una precarización generalizada y un constante bucle cíclico de consumo y productividad, que agota tanto el cuerpo como estimula la mente ansiosa. Bajo un constante vigilancia impuesta por las modas de las redes sociales, la ansiedad de la gente por una actuación óptima se origina de un deseo por ser vistos para poder existir: la combinación entre la tiranía de la visibilidad de Paula Sibilia y el ocularcentrismo de Remedios Zafra, así como la proliferación de las industrias centradas en la sobreproducción de múltiples imágenes del “Yo”: la cultura del selfie, que implica algo más que las

imágenes narcisistas que sobrepueblan la esfera de Internet. Dentro de los *cuartos conectados* de nuestra megalopolis, los nuevos *hikikomoris* encuentran refugio fuera del frenesí de los *no lugares*, los cuales ponen al cuerpo en constante movimiento parado a través de diversos medios de transporte, empleados para la disociación del propio cuerpo con respecto a lo que nos rodea. El *cuarto conectado*, entendido como el nexo entre lo virtual y lo real, y mediado por la pantalla del ordenador como la ventana quintaesencia, también se convierte en un lugar para proveer intimidad, aquella del distanciamiento social y fuera del alcance y del tacto, para aquellos que carecen de la misma en los espacios urbanos abarrotados. Considerando que, por otra parte, que también se convierte en un lugar potencial para la proliferación de nuevas y alternativas subjetividades, aquellas creadas online, que Broder y Bess exploran para así desafiar el miedo la propia obsolescencia corporal o la ruptura con la realidad creando vínculos sociales inestables. En términos de analizar cómo la afectividad y la imagen corporal afectan las identidades de las jóvenes, se debe tener en cuenta la sexualidad: Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete y Gonzalez muestran de manera activa sus propios puntos de vista sobre la sexualidad y las interacciones afectivas a través de sus poemas. Por otro lado, las representaciones alternativas de los genitales femeninos y la masturbación desde un punto de vista femenino establecen nuevas formas de repensar y reclamar el empoderamiento, la resistencia y el amor propio desde lo personal hacia una posición política: si *testera* configura una nueva forma de escritura performative, entonces *cliquear* representa una nueva forma de explorar asertivamente el auto-placer para muchas mujeres alrededor del mundo.

Y finalmente, en ‘el capítulo 5. Entre los Peligros y Los Goces: La Polimorfía Cyber-Furcia’ (Between Danger(s) and Pleasure(s): The Poly-morph(l)vx Cyber-*Slut*), trato de cómo las dicotomías presentadas por las figuras contrapuestas de la Virgen y la Prostituta son traducidas en términos modernos como la Furcia y la Mojigata: estos ambivalentes y antagónicos estereotipos limitan las libertades sexuales y la confianza de las mujeres, y las convierte en más vulnerables a la hora de sufrir violencia y abusos. Equiparando el disfrute del placer al mostrar indecencia abiertamente, las mujeres están sujetas a comportarse de una determinada manera: así, el cuerpo femenino es monitorizado y controlado por otras fuerzas externas sociales que usan la represión sexual para aprovecharse de los medios reproductivos de la mujer bajo los preceptos heteronormativos del matrimonio y el amor romántico. Aquellas mujeres que se atreven a merodear fuera de este imperativo caen en la categoría de la mala mujer, y por tanto, crecen siendo excluidas por la vergüenza y la auto-represión. Reclamando la palabra furcia, muchas poetas *Alt [C]Lit*, así como otras artistas contemporáneas de las últimas dos décadas, han traído al debate político el tildar de puta, y señalaron hacia cómo el lenguaje contribuye a incentivar, e incluso justificar, la violencia

sexual de manera activa. Bess y Carrete exploran el empoderamiento de la transgresión y lo abyecto a través de los límites de la marginalidad, el deseo y el placer como modelos de cámara web (*cam girls*). Estimulando encuentros sexuales, estas nuevas formas de interacciones virtualmente mediatizadas han integrado la actuación voyeurística de la furcia virtual y la experiencia de la novia online mientras se protegen de los peligros potenciales asociados a la materialidad del trabajo sexual. La furcia se convierte en coyuntura entre ser una categoría política por la unidad y la sororidad, como reclaman los movimiento de las *#marchasdelasputas* y el *#yotambién* medidas legales efectivas y protección material gubernamental para víctimas vulnerables y potenciales. Mientras que tendencias conservativas relacionadas con el Mito de la Castidad y la promoción de la abstinencia sexual ponen en riesgo los derechos de las mujeres y sus progresos sociales, las implicaciones de dichas tensiones son ilustradas en la representaciones de los poemas de Bess, Broder, y Gonzalez sobre la violencia sexual y sus implicaciones psicológicas.

Como uno puede apreciar fácilmente, el lenguaje empleado en el título de los diferentes capítulos parecen estar codificado en alguna ocasión, casi haciéndolos ilegibles para aquellos que no están acostumbrados al lenguaje, símbolos y tipografías online. Estos títulos deben ser leídos de diferentes maneras, dependiendo de si uno puede entenderlos a primera vista. Aparte de las diferentes lecturas de la [C] que ya he explicado anteriormente, me gustaría comentar en el simbolismo del resto, así como las maneras en las deberían ser leídos: la '@', conocida también como 'símbolo arroba', es usado de manera asidua en correos electrónicos y para introducir el nombre de usuario en Twitter, que en el título de las secciones puede ser leído como una 'a' pero en otros contextos es usado al final de las palabras para indicar género neutral. La '(Y)' se lee como 'i' o 'y', y se debe entender como una referencia al nombre alternativo de los Millennials, que también son conocidos como la 'Generación Y', y como una abreviación del pronombre interrogativo 'por qué', 'why' en inglés. La '(v)' puede ser leído como 'v,' 'u' o 'w,' que enfatiza la forma de triángulo invertido que la vulva tiene para reforzar explícitamente las políticas de género que están implícitas a lo largo de esta tesis. La '(\$)' representa tanto la letra 's' como el símbolo del dólar, sugiriendo las políticas geopolíticas que están integradas en la digitalización y monetización de la cultura digital. La '(0)' es otra alusión a la feminidad tal y como Sadie Plant la planeta en *Ceros y Unos*, como también sustituyendo la tradicional letra 'o' por puro simbolismo visual más que por analogía fonética. También, la vocal y letra 'Ø', comúnmente empleada en las lenguas escandinavas, puede leerse como la 'o' y ser interpretado de manera visual como una 'o' tachada, como la negación de ese símbolo femenino que representa a los genitales femeninos; la '(3)' debe ser leído como una 'e' invertida que sigue la numeración visual que caracteriza al lenguaje y los códigos computacionales.

Ambas [] y () tienen una función similar que sirve para añadir información extra o complementaria al significado de las palabras que puede ser leído de dos formas diferentes por la omisión o adición de dicho conjunto de letras. Y por último pero no menos importante, la ‘rrr’ se convierte en un guiño estético al rugido onomatopéyico originalmente usado por el grupo alternativo de punk y movimiento feminista *riot grrrl*. En definitiva, lo que quería expresar con el uso de estos símbolos y una combinación o disposición alternativa de las letras es la evidente influencia del lenguaje de ordenadores en el lenguaje humano, cómo estos indicios son suavizados, e incluso aparentemente entremezclado de una manera invisible y sutil, con nuestras interacciones lingüísticas diarias a través de los textos escritos. El registro coloquial empleado por las poetas de la Alt [C]Lit manifiestan un cambio lingüístico mayor en el que la tecnología está moldeando la manera en la que hablamos, y mayormente escribimos, como medio para comunicarnos virtualmente, caracterizado por la dematerialización de la presencia corpórea y la proliferación de las subjetividades incorpóreas online.

Para navegar estos temas, he seleccionado una serie de conceptos y teorías para así establecer un mapa conceptual a través del cual analizar y comprender la relevancia de la poesía Alt [C]Lit en relación con las más amplias tendencias sociales y culturales del presente. He empleado de manera extensa las teorías de Remedios Zafra sobre la cultura e identidades en red aplicando conceptos como prosumir, el cuarto conectado y el ocularcentrismo para así ampliar mis hallazgos literarios. También, he utilizado el argumento de Sadie Plant sobre los símbolos de ceros y unos, así como las analogías históricas y metafóricas entre teclear, escribir y tejer como partes intrínsecas de las destrezas y creación artísticas de las mujeres. En menor medida, pero también mayormente de manera recurrente, también me refiero a los textos filosóficos y sociológicos de Byung Chul Han sobre asuntos contemporáneos como la hipercomunicación, el vaciamiento del “yo” y el síndrome del quemado (*burnout*) para analizar ciertos factores sociales implicados en la creación de la literatura Alt [C]Lit, así como el concepto de los no lugares de Marc Augé para contextualizar las ansiedades urbanas sobre el desplazamiento y la alineación expresada en las estructuras arquitectónicas que conforman las ciudades modernas como Nueva York o Los Angeles. Desde un punto de vista feminista y teórico, he empleado autoras como Andrea Dworkin, Virginie Despentes, Angela Carter e Itziar Zita para lidiar con temas controvertidos sobre la feminidad contemporánea y la emancipación sexual integrada en el complejo de la *Virgen* y la *Prostituta*, la cual es una paradoja recurrente para las autoras de la *Alt [C] Lit*. Y finalmente, he aplicado las teorías sobre la integración e introyección de Melanie Klein a las políticas de la afectividad y la proyección del ego en diversas formas de consumo, como son el uso de drogas, sexo y vínculos con la comida. Estas

teorías en conjunto con otros estudios académicos, han contribuido a respaldar mis hallazgos sobre la poesía y arte Alt [C]Lit que he seleccionado para ilustrar mi hipótesis de tesis.

Finalmente, me gustaría formular la siguiente tanda de preguntas para intentar llegar a una conclusión al final de esta tesis, o al menos estimular la posición inquisitiva y crítica del lector abriendo nuevos debate y futuras líneas de investigación sobre la literatura, el feminismo, la sociedad y el rol de la tecnología en la actualidad: ¿Se puede considerar la poesía de la Alt [C]Lit literatura? ¿Puede ser considerada la literatura online como una forma de arte? ¿Por qué escoger mujeres en vez de hombres? ¿ Por qué es importante considerar el medio a través del cual se produce la escritura y la publicación como un nuevo paradigma de cambio en la noción de la literatura? ¿Por qué considerarías a este grupo de autoras una generación? ¿Qué temas configuran esta generación? ¿Es la noción de generación una forma válida para analizar la literatura? ¿Qué es literatura? ¿Quiénes definen lo que la literatura es?

Conclusiones

Volviendo a la cuestión que propuse inicialmente, me gustaría decir que la *Alt [C]Lit* conformada por las poetas Sarah Jean Alexander, Gabby Bess, Melissa Broder, Ana Carrte, y Mira Gonzalez, así como otras artistas afines por precedentes artísticos y literarios comunes, pertenecen a una generación de poetas digitales que también provienen de una genealogía literaria en los EEUU. Partiendo de lo que es entendido como la cultura de Internet, estas autoras de la *Alt [C]Lit* comparten una serie de características estéticas en términos del uso del lenguaje; temas comunes como son el tratamiento de la alienación, la soledad, la sexualidad, la afectividad y la performatividad social; la diferencia entre la persona real y el autor es también mediado por la creación de un alter ego en Internet, en vez de uno literario, abriendo paso a la multiplicidad de subjetividades representadas a través del género, la raza, y la diferencia entre las costas Este y Oeste en los EEUU; y la manera en que el nuevo propósito de la escritura se convierta en un medio a través del cual reaccionar a un contexto sociocultural particular, que también se refleja en la preferencia por la publicación primero online y después en papel.

Estos nuevos paradigmas están cambiando la manera en que la literatura es presentada por estos autores: a pesar de las críticas iniciales sobre si la literatura *Alt [C]Lit* originada en Internet, así como otras expresiones artísticas, deberían ser consideradas una forma de arte. Estas nuevas formas online están aconteciendo nos gusten o no, sin importar si las consideremos verdadero arte o no. Están aún ahí, son ampliamente leídos, y continúan circulando a través de un número creciente, e incontable, de lectores, que a su vez también produce, compulsivamente tecleando en sus ordenadores, publicando de manera gratuita en sus blogs y otras páginas web. Me gustaría señalar que la poesía de la *Alt [C]lit* va más allá del arte: es una manifestación cultural de un grupo que confronta una sociedad global y orientada hacia lo online, que ha sido iniciada por los Millennial, quienes son más dependientes de lo virtual que de plataformas materiales, y quienes están configurando nuevas formas de conocimiento e interacción con la realidad desde una perspectiva digital. Por lo tanto, considero que el valor liminal a la hora de aproximarse a estas autoras y sus idiosincrasias, las cuales están cambiando y adaptándose rápidamente a los tiempos que corren en la actualidad: si no tenemos en cuenta la influencia de la tecnología y los medios digitales en la literatura, perderemos, e incluso ignoraremos, un fenómeno el cuál es más grande que los estándares académicos tradicionales, e incluso, que el anticuado esnobismo cultural y artístico del canon.

Desde que comencé mi tesis en el 2014, estos últimos años de investigación han cambiado de manera radical en términos de cómo los avances tecnológicos han transformado tanto nuestras vidas como las formas de entender el conocimiento. Como uno habrá podido comprobar directamente, muchos de los enlaces con información clave han desaparecido sin dejar rastro: una paradoja que años e incluso siglos atrás podrían haber sido comparados con los devastadores efectos de un incendio en una biblioteca o archivo. Los súbitos cambios, así como la inestable e impredecible naturaleza de la *Alt [C]Lit*, están reflejados en cómo esta tesis ha ido mutándose: inicialmente, tenía un abanico de autoras más amplio, pero cuanto más las leía y analizaba, vi de manera más clara las cinco autoras definitivas que mantuve hasta terminar la tesis eran las más representativas, así como más similares, temáticamente y estilísticamente. Consideré incluir autoras como Ariana Reines, Patricia Lockwood, Dorothea Lasky e incluso la popular Rupí Kaur, pero descubrí que Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete y Gonzalez era más similares en muchos aspectos, desde las conexiones personales que mostraban entre ellas a través de redes sociales como *Facebook*, *Twitter*, o *Instagram* a las relaciones artísticas que ya habían establecido previamente a través de colaboraciones en revistas literarias online como *Illuminati Girl Bang*.

Actualmente, de todos los miembros de este grupo *Alt [C]Lit*, solo Melissa Broder continúa publicando su obras citaría mientras permanece activa en sus dos cuentas de *Twitter*. Ana Carrete es aún activa en su *Instagram* privado, auto-publicando y re-imprimiendo sus zines de poesía, mientras participa ocasionalmente en algunos slams de poesía alrededor del área de Los Angeles, y trabajando de manera principal como profesora de español en la escuela primaria. Gabby Bess reaparece ocasionalmente en *Instagram*, y su última actualización indicaba que estaba intentando seguir una carrera como trabajadora sexual mientras exploraba su lado más místico a través del tarot y rituales paganos. Y Sarah Jean Alexander volvió a publicar *Wild Lives* en 2018, se casó y parece trabajar como escritora de artículos para algunos magazines online mientras mantiene activo su *Instagram* de manera ocasional, especialmente cuando se casó con su pareja y documentó su luna de miel viajando por Italia. Parece ser que después del 2015, a excepción de Broder, el resto de autoras no han proseguido con sus carreras literarias de manera activa y han optado por otras carreras fuera de la escena artística: durante mi estadía en Nueva York, allá por el 2016, intenté contactar con ellas, pero no recibí respuesta alguna debido a este cambio entorno a sus aspiraciones laborales.

En el verano del 2014, la elección de estas autoras fue pura casualidad, o más bien una suerte fortuita, como todo en Internet suele acontecer: estaba muy motivada a la hora de comenzar un nuevo proyecto académico antes de comenzar el programa de doctorado. Mientras estaba considerando el tema principal de mi investigación doctoral, encontré un artículo escrito por la

poeta española Luna Miguel en el magazine cultural online Playground sobre un grupo de escritores y poetas americanos, conocidos como la *Alt Lit*, y enlace tras enlace, leí una serie de artículos que me condujeron a seguir navegando a través de la red en busca de los poemas de las autoras que Miguel mencionaba y sus trabajos publicados. Progresivamente conformé una pieza de retazos digitales masivo compuesto por una mezcla de libros e ebooks, chapbooks, fanzines, textos y revistas online, páginas web, cuentas de *Twitter*, *Instagram* y *Tumblr*, a través de los cuales estuve fisionando, y recopilando, cualquier tipo de información relevante para justificar mi interés inicial, e incluso atracción, por el trabajo de estas autoras. Entonces, para el otoño de 2014, una vez pude entrar en el programa, las alegaciones y casos controvertidos de violación y acoso sexual dentro de la *Alt Lit* eran una realidad irrefutable y los artículos aparecían cada vez que googleaba sobre ellos. Ese fue el mismo instante en que decidí que tenía enfocarme en las artistas femenina, y especialmente después de leer el manifiesto ‘no boys allowed’, que ha sido citado en su totalidad en el capítulo 1.

Siempre he sido parcial en términos de política de género, y mis lecturas de estos poemas expuestos a lo largo de la tesis están influenciados por una aproximación feminista, lo que mi directora de tesis Julia Salmerón denomina las lentes de género: no puedo quitármelas ya porque no podría ser capaz de volver a ver tan claramente como hago una vez las llevo puestas. A lo largo de la redacción de esta tesis, me he dado más cuenta aún de la importancia de investigar sobre las voces de las escritoras y artistas para presentarlas a la academia, para así en el futuro enseñarlas e inspirar a las generaciones futuras, como a penas me paso a mí misma durante mis años de formación como licenciada y estudiante de master: gracias a las profesoras y académicas feministas con las que me topé por las diferentes clases y seminarios a los que asistí, me inspiré para leer más literatura escrita por mujeres hasta que llegaron a ser el único tipo de literatura que actualmente consumo. De esta manera, me identifico con su forma de escribir, con los temas que tratan, con sus preocupaciones; cada pieza textual y de arte que descubro hablan de manera significativa sobre lo que es ser mujer en un mundo de hombres. Esta manera de identificarme con las autoras *Alt [C]Lit* como Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete y Gonzalez me han ayudado a navegar por mis propias experiencias: experiencias que eran ajenas a mí en un principio, pero que a medida que avancé en la vida, especialmente después de mi breve tiempo en Nueva York como parte de mi programa de intercambio internacional, ellas empezaron a calarme más hondo, y finalmente fui capaz de averiguar el por qué estaba atraída inicialmente por sus obras. Mi tesis no solo refleja mi interés por la poesía, el arte online que consumo activamente en el feed de mi Instagram diariamente, psicología, sociología e historia. También refleja las inquietudes y preocupaciones de toda una

generación a través de una serie de tendencias que son constantemente mostradas y cambiadas en nuestras redes sociales, los nuevos medios de comunicación que están educando y formando culturalmente a la juventud hoy en día.

Para mí, la presente tesis, mía y demás, no solo ha sido un proyecto académico, un paso más a seguir dentro de la carrera académica, un nivel más para mejorar mi currículum vitae profesional: se ha convertido en un paso más lleno de crecimiento personal, de nuevas experiencias y encuentros personales; un camino a través del cuál aprender de manera retrospectiva quién soy yo como una mujer Millennial entre su tardía veintena y temprana treintena, una precaria profesora de inglés, una aspirante a academia feminista, y (con suerte) una futura profesora universitaria versada en literatura, secretamente una escritora amateur. A través de estos temas que he explorado en los cinco capítulos previos, he sido capaz de explorar mis propias inquietudes sobre cuestiones acerca de mi propia identidad, que son versadas a través de la diversidad coral conformada por Alexander, Bess, Broder, Carrete, Gonzalez y otras artistas Millennial, y no tan nuevas, que he mencionado, analizado y comentado previamente. Estos textos, estas imágenes, estas ilustraciones, estas fotografías, estos vídeos, estas series de televisión, estas películas, estas obras de arte, estos *tweets*, estos ensayos representan a toda una generación, como ya he señalado de manera contundente anteriormente: yo también formo parte de esa generación. Soy una Millennial, y por tanto mi tesis también.

Si hubiera un lema con el cual me identificara es que lo personal siempre es político: cuanto más mayor me hago, más consciente me hago de la verdad detrás de esta declaración. Una vez uno empieza a conocerse a uno mismo y tiene la oportunidad de mirar a su alrededor, y ve como uno se sitúa en el mundo, entonces algo hace click mágicamente en su mente: todo cobra sentido. La manera en la que uno se ve a sí mismo como otros puedan verte, la manera en la que sientes como otros puedan (intentar) entender cómo sientes. Todo es reciproco y se mimetiza creando un bucle, una red de constantes interacciones que nos afectan y nos conforman de una manera mutuamente inclusiva y exclusiva. Fuerzas de atracción y de empuje condicionan de manera constante las maneras en las que nos relacionamos los unos con los otros, sean las mismas materializadas, encarnadas o influenciadas por diversas tecnologías. A lo largo de este aprendizaje, me he familiarizado con conocerme a mí misma, a odiarme, a desecharme, a cambiarme, a transformarme, a experimentar conmigo misma, a pederme, y finalmente a volver a encontrarme de nuevo. Las lecturas que he echo a lo largo de este largo proceso me han influenciado a la hora de pensar pero también la manera la manera en la que me siento: como muchos otros compañeros que están realizando un doctorado, me he enfrentado a situaciones de estrés, angustia y alegría que ha causado

en mí, y que permanecerán conmigo para el resto de mi vida académica, pero también a un nivel personal. Mi tesis se convirtió en mi mayor enemiga en algunos momentos, haciéndome cuestionar si todo este esfuerzo y trabajo merecía la pena considerando el desolador panorama que encontramos como jóvenes adultos y profesionales, el mercado laboral y la propia academia que aún se resisten a realizar cambios drásticos solo para su propio beneficio. También se convirtió en mi salvación para mi ansiedad y depresión: leyendo los miedos y anhelos de estas autoras me hizo darme cuenta de que los razonamientos que estaba dando para los análisis de estos poemas también hablaban sobre mi situación actual, a la parte más íntima de mi ser. Este hecho hizo que me diera cuenta de que lo que realmente quería en mi vida una vez perdí toda esperanza y credibilidad en mí misma.

No me gustaría decir que tengo todas las respuestas, especialmente considerando la naturaleza evasiva de los temas y los textos en los que estado trabajando de manera exhaustiva. Me gustaría declarar que he llegado a conocer de mejor manera mis propias preocupaciones así como hacía donde me dirijo en este preciso instante. Estamos viviendo tiempos de crisis, y normalmente la palabra crisis tiene una serie de connotaciones y efectos negativos una vez usados en los medios sociales e informativos, como son las noticias. Cada vez que una persona escucha la palabra ‘crisis’ parece que hay algo por lo que preocuparse, en un mal sentido. Pero etimológicamente, el sentido original de la palabra proviene del sustantivo *krisis* del antiguo griego, derivada de la forma verbal *krinien*, que significa ‘tomar una decisión’ o ‘decidir.’ Por lo tanto, esta crisis de pandemia puede ser definida como un ‘punto o momento decisivo en la vida,’ que puede tornarse para lo bueno o lo malo dependiendo de la que decisión que cada uno tome en este preciso instante: es más una oportunidad, más que una situación paralizante, destructiva o apocalíptica, un callejón sin salida en el sentido más literal. Que la decisión sea buena o mala es un hecho puramente subjetivo, así como la opinión del lector sobre la presente tesis, e incluso el valor artístico y literario de las poetas *Alt [C]Lit* presentadas aquí mismo. Lo que espero establecer presentando esta investigación a la academia es seguir contribuyendo con el desarrollo de una genealogía que está principalmente enfocada en la literatura de mujeres, en este caso poniendo el foco hacia las artísticas contemporáneas, quienes todavía son raras o difíciles de acceder, debido a su género, clase social y/o raza. También, ya que el éxito de sus obras es meramente identificado como alternativo, incluso marginal, fuera del canon y lo convencional, me gustaría dirigir la atención del lector hacia otro tipo de tipo de literatura a la que no estén acostumbrado o inicialmente atraídos. Presentando estos autores poco convencionales, espero motivar a otros investigadores a profundizar más en la *Alt [C]Lit*, y en otras tendencias por venir, para encontrar nuevas voces y representarlas, sin importar lo

que otros investigadores puedan opinar sobre su valor artístico o literario: quiero creer que la cultura es más que aquello que está admitido dentro de las instituciones, por el público general, por nuestras propias preferencias personales. Requiere de un cierto valor tomar la vía alternativa y explorar lo desconocido, y eso es lo que trata Internet, con su ausencia de límites, infinitas redes de sistemas y accesos que permiten la exploración de otras opciones: veremos qué es lo que está por venir en presente futuro, de velocidad y multiplicidad, así como de posibilidades.

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Appendix 1: Authors' Biographies

Sarah Jean Alexander

She is a writer from Baltimore, born in 1988, to a white American father and a Korean mother. She studied a degree in journalism at Townson University, and currently resides in Brooklyn, New York. She is the author of *I imagine you in your house, cleaning your chest*. She makes *Booze Art*, which consists on recording herself drinking a whole can of beer in one sip. She is currently editing a collaborative poetry collection, *Portrait of the Artist*, and participated at the Alt Lit anthology *40 Likely to Die Before 40* (Civil Coping Mechanisms, 2014).

Sarah is also the author of *Wildlives* (Big Lucks, 2015) reedited in 2018, and *LOUD IDIOTS* (Second Books, 2016) She has been published in different online magazines, such as *Lenny Letter*, *HOBART*, *Illuminati Girl Gang*, *Dazed Digital*, and *Noisey*. She is also the poetry editor of *Shabby Doll House*.

Her work can be found at:

- ❖ <http://sjwritten.wordpress.com/>
- ❖ <https://twitter.com/sarahjeanax>
- ❖ <http://sarahjeanax.tumblr.com/>



Gabby Bess

Gabby Bess was born in 1992, in Portsmouth, Virginia, to a white American father and an African American mother. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. She studied sociology for two years at the College of William and Mary.

She published her first book of poetry and short stories, *Alone with Other People* (CCM), in 2013, and a second book *Post Coño* (originally *Post Pussy*, which yet in English), translated into Spanish by El Gaviero Ediciones, in 2015. Previously, she published two chapbooks, *Airplane Food* and *Black Dot Series*.

She is also a freelance writer for online magazines, such as *Paper Magazine*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Broadly*, *The Daily Beast*, and *TopicalCream.info*. She is also publishing editor at *Illuminati Girl Gang*, and has produced videos which have been exhibited at various independent art galleries, such as *gURLs* at Transfer Gallery, *O Miami*, and *VOX Populi: Uncanny Visions 4*.

Her work can be found at:

- ❖ <http://www.dazeddigital.com/tag/gabby-bess>
- ❖ <http://gabbybess.com/>
- ❖ <https://twitter.com/seemstween>



Melissa Broder

Born in 1980 in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, in a Jewish family. She holds a BA from Tufts University and an MFA from the City University of New York. She has lived in diverse places, such as San Francisco or New York. She is married and currently resides in Los Angeles, California. She has been clean and sober since she was 25 years old.

She has already published four books of poetry: *When You Say One Thing but Mean Your Mother* (Ampersand Books, 2010), *Meat Heart* (Publishing Genius, 2012), *Scarecrone* (Publishing Genius, 2014), and *Last Sext* (Tin House, 2016).

Also, she has published an essay collection, *So Sad Today* (Gran Central, 2016), inspired on her Twitter account alter-ego and pen name in other mediums, and has recently written her first novel, *Piscis* (Penguin Random House, 2018) She is the winner of a Pushcart Prize in 2017 for her poem “Forgotten Sound,” which forms part of *Last Sext*. Her poems can be found in literary magazines such as the New Yorker, POETRY, Illuminati Girl Gang, Tin House, HTMLGiant, and so on.

She also collaborates in other written media, such as her own section at VICE (So Sad Today column), for Lenny Letter (horoscopes column), and at Elle.com (Beauty and Death column).

Her work can be found at:

- ❖ <http://www.melissabroder.com/>
- ❖ <https://twitter.com/melissabroder>
- ❖ <https://twitter.com/sosadtoday?lang=es>



Ana Carrete

She was born in 1986 in San Diego and grew up in Tijuana, Mexico, in a Mexican family but she currently lives in San Diego, California. She is a bilingual poet in English, Spanish and Spanglish. She holds an B.A. and an M.A. in Spanish Language and Literature from San Diego State University-California State University.

She published her first book *Baby Babe* (Civil Copying Mechanisms) in 2012. She has self-published series of poetry zines: *make-believe*, *love-making* (2010), *Why Fi* (2014), *Sadmess* (2014), *I didn't say you could* (2018). Other zines are *This Is Controversial* (Estamp, 2010) and *Naif y Kawaii* (Editorial Gigante, 2014)

Her work has been published at different literary magazines and journals online, such as *Gemstone Readings*, *Shabby Doll House*, *Illuminati Girl Gang*, *Spork Press*, *The Scrambler* and *Dazed Digital*. She also has participated as well in diverse anthologies, such as *1000 Millones: Poesía en lengua Española del siglo XXI* (Editorial Municipal de Rosario, 2014), *40 To Die Before 40: An Alt Lit Anthology* (CCM, 2014), or *VOMIT: antología de poesía joven norteamericana* (El Gaviero Ediciones). She usually participates at poetry events where she reads her poems live. She is the web editor of *New Wave Vomit*.

Her work can be found at:

- ❖ https://twitter.com/ana_carrete
- ❖ <http://idonothishavepenisenvy.blogspot.com.es/>
- ❖ <http://anacarretecortes.tumblr.com/>



Mira Gonzalez

She was born in 1992 in Venice Beach, California, to a Mexican-Jewish father and a white American mother. Her stepfather is the bassist Chuck Dukowski from *Black Flag*. She dropped out from studying psychology in LA to move to New York and pursue her writing career for over a year, but she currently resides in Los Angeles.

Her first collection of poetry was published in 2013 under the title of *i will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together*, published by the independent press Sorry House. Her last publication, *Selected Tweets*, was a double-book collaboration with fellow Alt Lit writer Tao Lin in 2015, which included visual art and other extras. In an interview, she points out that she uses Twitter as a platform through which she experiments with her writing: that is using language to identify with other people.

She has also published her poems in many magazines, such as *Vice*, *Hobart*, and *Muumuu House*. Her first book was widely praised by critics and many independent magazines, such as *Dazed&Confused*, *Rumpus*, *Nylon* or *Economy magazine*, and it was a finalist for the *The Believer* magazine's Poetry Award in 2014.

Her work can be found at:

- ❖ <https://twitter.com/miragonz>
- ❖ <http://miratortilla.tumblr.com/>



Appendix 2. Poems used in the analysis of each chapter

Sarah Jean Alexander

“In Place of Me” (from *Wildlives*)

I knew you as a living being in one lonely town
and now I only recognize you by the way your

cucumber breath tastes against my own mouth
like a glass of water that has been sitting on a

nightstand for eight nights with no movement.
Slightly tinny and dusty and dry, dead skin cells-

It seems easy to create an imaginary twin for all
the events you'd like to attend but would rather stay

at home by yourself than touch shoulders with the
people who don't know what it's like to be alone.

“Minute lengthening of the day” (from *Wildlives*)

Ocean waves late at night seem like one
element trying to secretly steal from another.

Before you fall asleep, remember –
literally nothing you do matters.

I am sorry if you expected
something differently of this world.

“Challenge” (from *Wildlives*)

Any time I lose something
Important in my life
I like to fill the new formed void
With really loud and abrasive foods.

I want everyone to know I'm coming:
Hear me chomping,
See me chewing,
Taste the snowflaked-flecks of cauliflower
Spewing from my conversation
And into yours.

I want to become aware
Of the motions of my body

In ways I didn't know I could feel.

I want to learn to love the parts
That drive people away,

And I want to learn to hate the things
That make them stay.

The next time someone tells me,
You can't make them love you,

I will tell them,
Watch me.

“The Edge-Parts of Different Places” (from *Wildlives*)

It is hard for one human
to fit inside another human
because each month that passes
is another month removed
and if he is three months and she is three months
then together they half a year
of shrunken sizes and bloated minds.

Him and her and all of the tiny men and women,
a hundred thousand bodies not compatible,

a hundred thousand bodies in cold temperatures
existing on the edge-parts of different places.

He says, *I made my arms the perfect length.*
She says, *I made my arms out of bats.*
All of the tiny black wings began to flap.

Wings.
wings.
wings.

A woman made of bats
made of wings
made of black.

“Human adults” (from *Wildlives*)

I want to tap on your skull from the outside:
Is anyone alive in there?

Is anyone alive anywhere, really?

I want to put my ear against the hair on your head

and hear the *ahhhhh* of a low, distant voice.

They develop and circulate for 120 days.

I still have a little bit of time left.

Ahhhhh.

Sometimes
people meet people
and they fall in love quickly.
Other times
people meet people
and both of those people
go blind.

I am somewhere between
stupid fast love
and not being able to see.

I've been enjoying my full-time job
as the blood plasma milkman in your body.
Yes, you're welcome for that scab.

You're welcome for those hormones.
Did you know that I am yellow, not red?
Most things are.
but unlike most things,
I will still be here tomorrow.

I want to sit on your brain
like it is a refrigerated block
of leftover spaghetti,
bouncing up and down
on cold matter
and tapping against your skull
from the inside.

I am whispering *ahhhhh*
and waiting for you to hear.

"You by way of me" (from *Wildlives*)

If you look at the moon at midnight
And I look at the moon at 7 PM,

We will be on the opposite sides of the Atlantic
Staring at the same spot in space.

No one ever tells you to stare at the sun.
That would be dangerous. It would hurt too much

But if we are being honest with each other,
Isn't this supposed to?

“Isidoro” (from *Wildlives*)

In the ER at 3 in the morning,
I rub your hand in between my hands
with a book open in my lap.
You smile.
I can see the ringing in your ears.
I can feel the waves from your head,
transferring into mine
by way of our touching bodies.

There is a restaurant
in the direct center of Rome
called Isidoro
where I am waiting
with my mouth open.

You can put a number
of things inside of me
including – but not limited to –
gnocchi, saffron, lemon wedges,
your fingers, porcini, sardines,
shiraz, silver dollars, ocean water.

Gabby Bess

“20MG/DAY” (from *Alone With Other People*)

I'm alone here, with the whales.
I can think of anything and still be alone.
I wrote this poem and now I am alone with
this poem, the whales, and the abstractly formed
thoughts that I've already forgotten about. These words
that I write don't compare to what I've imagined
I am a powerful force amongst whales.

I feel like my anti-depressants are working.

Painted onto the wall tiles, the whales are on clouds and
their bodies are clouds too.
Sometimes I press my head against the shower wall and
cry quietly into them.

“BAD BITCH” (from *Alone With Other People*)

We mapped out every conceivable route through the
subways of New York
in our search to find Jay Z to show him our poetry,
unsolicited. In the process our bodies shrunk, feeling
humbled. After a period of 3 of 6 months,

Jay Z politely declined our poetry in a form
rejection letter that I printed out and framed
and often look at now as it sits on the edge of my desk in
my corner office with a view. I look back
on the whole thing fondly and have a laugh
with you as we catch up over drinks.

Here is a graph:
I call you a bitch in a way that means ‘Girl Power’
Jay Z calls you a bad bitch in a way means ‘Dope Girl’
From what we were to CEOs
Of the Word Bitch,
we started from the bottom
and now we are still at the bottom,
buried in a mattress like drug money.

That night we felt empowered to stand
on the bar singing, LADIES IS PIMPS TOO
and I GIVE UP ON LIFE. Damn, I took it
so much to heart that I couldn’t even sleep with those
words inside of my chest.

Nearing 4am I was still taking pictures of my veins
through the near-translucent skin on my breasts and the
undersides of my forearms to place
in an eBay listing. I sold my blood
for its street value: The Blood of a Young-Girl

The money
I received is harmless and secret, buried in a mattress
that I have diagrammed here: This portion is for the
dollar
This portion is for feminism
This portion is for The Blueprint 1-3
This portion is for sleeping
This portion is for turning, sleepless

**“Google search history: webmd, fibromyalgia, webmd lumps in throat, webmd throat cancer,
how do you know if you have throat cancer, like, for real?” (from *Alone With Other People*)**

It was 7:40 when I sat down to write this poem. The time is now 7:41 and I have two lines written regarding the belligerent nature of time. Four lines in and I still have not given consent to all this forward motion. Everything can kill me.

The abstract concept of time can kill me. Cancer will definitely kill me.
I have a non-specific fear of cancer.
I think, for the average person,

the odds are in favor of not getting cancer.
I am an average person. I will be okay. And if it is true that laptops somehow increase your chances of getting cancer, I don't care.
I will just increase my non-specific fear of cancer appropriately.
I am convinced that I suffer from a mild form of what I have named heart appendicitis, causing my heart to feel vaguely discomforted for the entire length of the average lifespan of an American woman.
In old age, when my heart explodes, I will smile and say, "Finally." Whatever is going to kill me will kill me and it will be mine.
I have never died, an image of teeth biting into something cold and soft is something that can make me feel uncomfortable, but what I lack in experience I can make up for in superficiality. And of course, the downfall of the modern woman will be loving parents.

"HOW TO LIVE" (from *Alone With Other People*)

On the edge of my bathtub I watch a girl lick cum off of her face and smile.

I can cry while watching porn when it reminds me of sex with someone that I loved who now loves somewhere else.

When the girl in the video kind of does something that she thinks is sexy but the guy laughs instead of thinking it's sexy. When the sex is slow and it takes some time

to figure out how to change positions without pulling out.

My heart pushes up this heart stuff. I can feel it when
strangers that look like us are fucking. We exist
somewhere in there.

“TRAVEL SOUTH” (from *Alone With Other People*)

The window to my bedroom
muffles louder things
that are happening just on the other side.

Though I know that we are just animal machines that
will one day leave
a final task uncompleted,

I want to gather a crowd of strangers to smash and break
objects with their hands.

Through this experience the strangers will create a
shared memory and when everything is broken they can
turn to one another and say, “Remember when things
were whole?”

After I incite the crowd of strangers into smashing and
breaking objects with their hands I want to encourage
them to just hug and feel calm.

I want to feel soft next to a body that feels soft A body
that breathes like I breathe:
In and out

I remember when we used to lay on your bed, stacked
lovers,
and breathe into each other’s mouths as practice
for when we would inevitably have to live and survive
underwater together

When I get like this,
bathed in the nostalgia of events obfuscated by time, I
could probably walk around my neighborhood
and remember small things about you for
upwards of 6 hours

Now, I appreciate the emotions
that you have toward me
(Of goodwill and continued interest in how I spend my
days) but I wish it could be love
I want to make it love: A concrete feeling
of laying side by side,

not touching

but knowing that you are there as I am alone, as we are
being pushed apart
at a rate of 5 miles per hour
by a migrating pod of whales.

Every year, starting in the late summer, the whales begin
to travel south

and every year,
the whales move us further away from each other.
We are suspended in the sea.

This cannot be helped. This is simply the result of
evolutionary processes.

It is simple, like this:
My stomach goes up and down because I am breathing
and I am experiencing reality because I am breathing

On my own I cannot gather large crowds to form
Nor can I influence their collective actions or emotions I
But I can experience reality without breathing
for up to one minute and, for example,
I know this truth:

I can see a picture of an open mouth and know
that it is Sasha Grey's open mouth

**“IF INSTEAD OF ASKING ME TO INSTALL UPDATES
AND RESTART MY COMPUTER I WAS ASKED IF I
WANTED TO DIE INSTANTANEOUSLY I WOULD
PROBABLY CLICK YES INSTEAD OF NOT NOW”** (from *Alone With Other People*)

When I am sad, I masturbate.
It feels pathetic for about 10 minutes and OK for about 30
seconds.

Not because of the sensations
but because my hand is in my pants and I am pretending
it's your hand (even through you are right-handed
and I use my left) and you see, still confusing your
hand for mine is an embarrassing thing to do,
even in the dark

Then there is the guilt of wanting you
but only reaching an orgasm when I watch the tiny,
naked people on my laptop

Then there is just the volume. The awful volume of
forced guttural noises

and happiness even on the lowest volume setting

But I need the noises to make it feel real, or perhaps,
transparently fake

I feel like I'm developing (if not already developed) a
crippling porn addiction.

No, no it all feels good, I now remember (having done it
just before editing this poem=

I enjoy the whole orchestra of it: The guilt of missing you
with the nice feeling between my legs with the orb of
light and high-pitched noises emanating from my laptop

This is how I have sex now. I feel very advanced. In the
future, machines will replace humans that I've loved and
most other things. I have preemptively prepared to live
without you-for when you can no longer accidentally
return to my bed.

In the two years that you've been gone I have become an
extremely advanced human/MacBook/xvideos.com
hybrid. This will prove to be an advantage, in the future.

**“INSIDE OF THIS POEM THERE IS A ROCK AND THEN
THERE IS ME” (from *Alone With Other People*)**

Inside of this poem there is a rock and then there is me.

Outside of this poem the rock is just a rock.
Outside of this poem I am being shot out of a cannon in
an earnest attempt to move my body
farther away from earth.

Just kidding.

I'm writing this poem alone in my room.

But in this poem, man,
the rock is so dumb.
It has no conception of feminism.
The rock can't even understand the poem that I put it in
but being an object
is better than being a human.

The rock is better than me. It is smug.

The rock is so fucking smug in this poem.

In this poem, if the rock is dumb
then I am severely disabled.
I am just a human in this woman body.

I want to be objectified. As an object, I am passive and
unmoving
until you move me.

I can be your bitch for cash
I can be new&softbodiedinnocent and dirty&used
but only if that is what you want

I want to be an object: Coveted

Craved
A representation
of an woman and a Maybach in adjacent rap lyrics

An empty glass that can hold

Now, at this point in the poem I must admit
that I kidded you, again.
I am writing this poem

in my room but I am not alone.

Inside of this poem there is a rock
and then there is me
(and all of the me's that I can imagine)
(and all the me's that men can imagine for me) and then
there is you

(and all of the you's that you can imagine)

(and all the you's that I can imagine for you) and then
there are strangers.

Right now, on my webcam, hundreds strangers
have fallen in love with me and they tell me this

as I pull at my underwear and place them into a poem.

“OVERSIZED T-SHIRTS” (from *Alone With Other People*)

What if I'm actually boring and I only know how to
communicative with people [men]
via a hyper-sexualized version of myself? I'm posting this

inquiry

to the conspiracy theory message boards.

Sitting on your couch in my best underwear, with my hair
up and your old shirt on,
I am a small boy swallowed by his
father's clothing

Proud & Smiling.
LOOK WHAT I'VE DONE, DAD.

Last night, our naked asses touched and that is what we
were:
Two Naked Asses Touching

We weren't supposed to do this
We weren't supposed to get naked like this and then
leave our bodies to look down on ourselves, aerially,
viewing the shapes that our spines could make together

Now I sit on your couch and project an image of the word
BORING onto your forehead as
if your thoughts were showing through
your skin.

Our fingers,

fractions away
from holding hands, remain heavy islands

("There is probably a mathematical equation for figuring
out the amount of time spent staring at empty hands in
the average lifespan

For the amount of time that is spent walking past couples
that are holding hands

and laughing

For the number of times I have wanted to scream out to
them, to those filthy hand-holders:

YOU ARE FUCKED UP

And the number of times that I simply continued to walk,
turning
like an unsteady sniper trying

to carefully discern

which pair of hands could be loosened to fit mine
between them)

You look straight ahead, unflinching,
as I look at you, projecting
more words onto your forehead. Our spines create
shapes unnamable and our faces look sad
but I think that is just the way our faces are.

“THEORICAL VIOLENCE” (from *Alone With Other People*)

The sex can be rough
to bring pleasure with
choking & punching & the sloshing
of liquids in the back of your throat
to spit near my eye area. To reduce
my suffering, you can take my own
hands within yours
to rub the spit into my eyes &
into my mouth & you can kill me
inside of your head as many times as you need, just to
feel calm. Is anyone moved
by the plainness of raw skin anymore?

Where did this tenderness come from?

To reduce your suffering,
I will fill the inner lining of my stomach
with bullets by ingesting them like pills
until I sag heavy
& full in your hands.
The shifting of skin on skin
sounds something like an underhanded truce. Like
kissing in a trench with your fingers crossed behind your
back. I listen
as the radio plays a song about guns
Just the sound of it – the gunshot
But not an actual gunshot – a human voice mimicking the
sound of a gunshot
over a heavy beat.

Melissa Broder

"Last Terror" (from *Last Sext*)

What kind of thing would orphan a mind
Was it the abyss
With its infinite carves
Or the everywhere of graves
That said I was alone
My darling piggie
Darling piggie orphan of my mind
I will unearth you to the snouts of your tribe
Even if we have to leave the Earth
I will find you a home
And forgive you in your slops
Even as you eat my head and hair and heart

“binge eating in 20187” (from *Meat Heart*)

Wild Man is just like me
Starved into fractions.

We all are, the whole colony
Raised on motherboards

Sugar cane screenshots
Pixelated onions.

But I have a jaw that seeks chunks
And he has the heart of a fat man.

In his cave we drink vapor ale
Snarf dust fowl, sediment meats.

Nothing is enough
He chains me to the rocks

Then slaps my growling stomach
Until I spew static

Making space for ash fish
And elemental octopi.

I find a thighbone in the stone
And think of friends gone missing.

I hear my human heart beat.
I wonder why he has utensils.

When he cooks a real live cassoulet
Flesh and fat, no hoaw,

I turn my face from the bowl
And put my fingers in his mouth.

“Vertigo” (from *Meat Heart*)

One minute Hollywood Boulevard
Is a rotating field. Repeat
I am to get your knees below your head.

Afternoon hours feels fenceless.
The drugstore soda fountain drains
And all the other starlets are foexier.

You could murder them.

Now imagine a famous ghost comes to kiss your crescent face.

Let yourself float says the ghost,
And where there was only sidewalk
Appears a constellation of stars.

Up above the globe you ask.
In it he says, twirling his moustache.

Watch a starlet on TV. Her lipstick
Smells like almonds, flaking off your lips.

See yourself scream in a shower scene.
Eat bloody hamburgers. It's a slasher.

You always wanted a witness
To lift you from the crowd.
Now you don't even need jewelry.

Watch your bracelets dissolve like tablets.
The Hollywood sign tumbles in your soup
And you gobble up the alphabet.

You are the breeze rolling down Topanga.

At sunset watch the ghost go poof
But you are him too. Watch grass glow.

“In want of rescue from the real” (from *Last Sext*)

My mindfriends went
They offed themselves
I made new mindfriends fast and wet

But they kept dying dry
Fantasies die so dry
Still I held on
Because the real is arctic
And I am without womb
And the char of inner Earth
Will ash my bones sometime
Then they all began to die
Before they even breathed
And I could see their corpses
Before I saw their eyes
And a thousand past-life deaths
Tore the mask off my mind
And I am scared of death
And I am scared of life

“Knowledge is power no it’s not” (from *Scarecrone*)

Obsession is my weather forecast.
The object keeps raining.
Shut me up with a computer.
Revolution is coming for my pillow.
Can you make the revolution.
I am frightened to be seen through the eyes of a dog.
So boring boring and full of black instruments.
The instruments pixelated like yours.
We are fucking in an unmarked van.
Only one flame of eros gets lit.
You try to choke me and buy me seltzer.
I choke on the possible air.
Porn is the weatherman.
You change coats again again.
Talk to me about free love.
The revolution will change me for five minutes.

“Facsimile” (from *Meat Heart*)

How have you genitals?
It is enough
you have hands. Copy

your hands. Send them.
Triplicate, I’ll open
my throat. I could

make your golem
from meat. The neighbors
will squirt and spy

to see me on the loaf.
Too few fingers. So much
cream. I need kneepads

just to put on lipstick.
This is how skin cripples
in liquids. Slick slots.

I am your widow. You
are alive. Stop writing
poltergeist. Write bodies.

“Protrusion” (from *Scarecrone*)

I hold my legs
like two chicken drumsticks.
I could rip them off.
I am capable
of nothing
but black words
on a white tongue.
God gave me a red tongue
and only god knows
who god is.
Bring me a priest
gushing off
in the moonlight
with fishies that go
for a night swim
so I with open mouth
praying over
a dead rose
can gulp
that ocean butter up
and swell
like a baleen whale.

“30th Edition” (from *Meat Heart*)

When I remake Lolita
tith my old English teacher

I’m not enough
gangly bones.

The rule is

he must burrow in my convex

while I coldly
call him fruithead.

An extra milk molecule
tips.

Somebody forgot to freeze me.

Nymphets don't vibrate
in their bobby socks.

I am supposed to be cork dry.
I am a fat fish.

Nevermind a dolly

when I'm legal to buy weaponry.

If a jury doesn't care
what I do with my torso

Then call me Humbert.

Ana Carrete

"the big ones eat the little ones" (from *Baby Babe*)

my little sister whistles and records it
then plays it
over and over again and i high-fiver her
because i can't whistle

we laugh for a long while

my sister says things in French
and i like how things sound

she's learning and i'm just looking at her
go

my little sister studies electrical engineering
and sometimes i don't know what she's talking about
but she's probably going to make more money than me
sooner

during the renaissance men were
soldiers and kings and poets
at the same time

why is that so hard to understand

right now everyone does other things
like run around
fall down or sit on the couch
and stare at their screens
for hours

this doesn't make anyone better or worse

it really doesn't

i said I wasn't going to drink alcohol
again but then I thought okay maybe
i just won't drink vodka

cumbia salsa merengue tango flamenco lambada
currency exchange swing

i feel stupid but clever i think things like
e-true-bollywood story and
dancing with the hispanic stars and
honey i shrunk your penis and
oops i shrunk it again and
bad to the bone wait that already exists
so i think bad to the boned instead
and then i go back to the original phrase
and then i think about mine and smile
and then i hate myself
and then i don't
and then i do

because the other day i imagined someone stabbed me

while i was in my car in my country not yours mine
and then i thought about tweeting it
just got stabbed

and my dad only calls me princess when i don't wash
the dishes so i'm not who you think i am

i'm floating away with a penis made of spam

just kidding gotcha

i have one of those long balloons so i took some pictures
pretending the balloon was a penis
pretending it was my boner
and i failed but who cares
nobody needs my fake boner

during the holidays some family members
call me
the writer

some people think
they're so funny
shit
i'm just like whatever
when I walk around

“adcdFML*” (from *Baby Babe*)

my stomach growls
when you kiss me
and it's embarrassing

so i concentrate on the good things
like the actual kiss
or the doughnuts we'll eat later

sometimes i think about freeing
eighteen year old brides

*FML means “fuck my life”

Cute taxi driver – (from *make-believe love-making*)

Your car wasn't there anymore
You left without me

I vomited on the sidewalk
I texted goodbye
But saved it as a draft

The taxi driver flirted with me
Later

“loading porn” (from *Baby Babe*)

what are you doing
semen isn't toothpaste

grab my neck i'll grab yours

gravity floats around us

there's poetry in my throat

it's going down

my esophagus

i swallow it

“your semen is the data your penis compresses” (from *Baby Babe*)

I'm going to burn your age sex location onto a cd

And then I'm going to throw that cd like a frisbee

yes i'm going to throw you away

the other day i watched porn and it made me feel sad

i never watch porn at night

because the liquid facial soap I use

looks and feels like semen

and i feel pornographic

i need to wash my face because the party is over

“freudian clit” (from *Baby Babe*)

the stress that we release is the product

of not being allowed

to feel okay

while being honest

“dolls don't have pussies” (from *Baby Babe*)

i'm in the middle of a very dark alley again

but this time i'm hiding under a blanket that glows

in the dark trying to hide from catastrophes

i'm touching this fake barbie doll

and i say fake

because it looks barbie-ish

but it's not the original brand

and I'm her plastic tits

but no one is moaning

and i stab her with candy cane

(because female penises are made of candy)
but nothing happens

dolls don't have pussies
so don't you ever
call me doll again

i look for sharp shit in my backpack
and bang her locked pussy
repeatedly

she has a hole now
but there's no moaning

i scream all the sexist things
everyone has ever said to me
and i'm sweating but i'm not going to cry

i'm tired of hiding but i think i'm going to
crazy glue this blanket to the floor

"i try to erase the trash with filthy words" (from *make-love make-believe*)

because I have no answers
and they five none
i scream obscenities
to no one in particular

and here is another one:

she still cares
a little
that's why she hides
her hands in her panties

when she's alone

"winking vagina" (from *Baby Babe*)

a penis comes and clicks my vagina
did you believe that i made that up
i mean i made it go up
i made a boner with my naked hands

"my sex is an upside down triangle" (from *Baby Babe*)

we talk about stupid things like anime
and youtube videos

we get serious and disagree

we buy things and fuck

we fuck and buy things

whenever i'm single

my sex is the asexual triangle

my sex is upside down

“talk to the cunt” (from *Baby Babe*)

i travel from one country to another and turn into
different animals

i need to turn into more than one animal

an suv drove by

i have impure thoughts every five seconds

super Christians to the rescue

my tongue turns into something sexy and wet

i think you can fill in the blanks

“cunt me in” (from *Baby Babe*)

it's cold and my hands are breaking

you say i taste like cold
cold guava

you kill my laughter with your tongue

you lick outside my heart

it feels like you're about to

but i'm just going crazy

let me

no

first let's spend a long time coming

how come i don't know
just because okay

cunt me in baby

cunt me in

“wiccan do this” (from *Why Fi*)

i swallow a sword and cut myself in half
this is the first and last magic trick I learned
i learned it well

“fuck you three dimensionally” (from *make-believe love-making*)

i’m fucking you
in my mind
and i know you
want to three dimensionally

i want you underneath me

but i am open

to untitled sex positions

“minami minegishi” (from *Why Fi*)

a Japanese pop idol shaved her head
tearfully apologized for dating
a backup dancer from another pop group

japanese pop idols aren’t supposed to have boyfriends
they’re supposed to be virgins for their fans

there’s strict rules about dating and relationships in general

if they’re off-limits they’re no longer worthy of fan’s
adoration and fantasy
if they’re off-limits they’re no longer worthy of fan’s adoration and
if they’re off-limits they’re no longer worthy of fans and
if they’re off-limits they’re no longer worthy and
if they’re off-limits they’re no longer and
if they’re off-limits they’re off-limits

the rule is known as renai kinshi or ‘forbidden love’

“my bad” (from *Baby Babe*)

I got your email
the title of your email was

french press me

and i thought that was some kind of
sex offer
but it wasn't
you were really talking about
expensive coffee

“the cult of eternal youth” (from *Baby Babe*)

if i shaved my head would people think i'm like
britney or would they think i'm like
natalie portman or would they not care at all

and would you stop loving me or
would you point and laugh but still
kiss my forehead

“virgin or witch” (from *Baby Babe*)

i'm all the disney witches

i bake apple pies and poison
everything i bake

i steal your voice and hide it
in a seashell

do you like pizza
i'll hide it in a seashell too

“girls on cam” (from *Baby Babe*)

is that the way boys think about and or remember girls
the girl moves in slow motion most of the time
she runs or spins around
she blows kisses in his direction or stares or smiles or laughs or
touches his thigh and looks and acts
extremely quirky

Mira Gonzalez

"untitled 5" (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

I am looking at people who are dancing and touching each other
I am drinking vodka with ice and feeling incredibly fucked
I wonder if anyone feels more lonely now than they felt an hour ago
when they were alone in their rooms looking at things on the internet

“I feel more lonely when I am with people than I do when I am alone looking at the Internet” (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

in social situations I hide specific parts of my personality that I think
other people might perceive as unappealing
I don't feel like I am pretending to be something different than what I
am
I don't feel like I am anything really
I am very tired all the time
I don't identify with most people
I don't think highly of myself
I am too passive to create a situation in which I convince another
person that I am valuable
that I am someone who deserves things
that my physical presence in the world should induce positive or
negative feelings
everyone is growing apart from me
I am letting them do that

“self-defeating personality disorder” (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

a few visceral emotions
creating a small and heavy thing
this idea in my stomach
limbs reaching forward and around with platonic willingness
touching your face for an indeterminate amount of time
human density that causes nearby birds
to suffer minor neurological damage
can you feel this permanent concept beneath my ribcage
you cannot create anything or feel something that nobody has felt
before

“I am going to stop eating” (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

when I am about to die
I will eat four almonds
I want to touch every person in the world at least once
I bought a sandwich then threw it away
I want to snort ambien
does anyone want to do that with me
send me an email

“in public places you sit or stand quietly” (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

you try to not draw attention to yourself
you are considerate and polite in social situations
you hide certain opinions and express other ones

you want people perceive you as agreeable
anyone can enjoy your presence for a short period of time
you allow people to project appealing qualities onto you
for this reason they maintain relationships with you
for a few weeks, months, a year or two
you take drugs because they make you feel different
benzodiazepines make you feel detached, affectionate
as if your opinions and desires exist independently of you
amphetamines make you feel thinner, more sociable
you are equally compelled by experiences with extremely positive or
extremely negative outcomes
physically attractive people don't appeal to you
you feel compelled by people based on their ability to change things
your perception of reality, the ways in which you assign connotation to
memories
you are interested in people who, when thought of years from now,
will cause you to recall certain, specific, crippling emotions

“mcsweeney’s caused global warming” (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

lately I have been watching this emotion
cautiously, from a safe distance
today this emotion lit a bank on fire
and developed a cult following
I am going to consume your entire body
by lying down on top of you and breathing very hard
and we will feel alienated by way of osmosis
would you please push your head against my head
until we can mutually confirm our place in the universe
did you know that I can only have an orgasm
when I am lying down on my back
also I have never seen snow
a decrease in the number of microscopic particles
between my mouth and your fingers
has caused me to experience extremely positive feelings
also anxiety and severe depression
I am concentrating on becoming 40mg of adderall right now

“symbolic interactionism” (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

People walk from one destination to another
With looks of determination on their faces
They stare at me
And they say ‘where the fuck are you going’
I say ‘I am going to a place’
They say ‘fuck you’

And I have an intense feeling of being a pathetic asshole
And that feeling manifests itself in the form of frantic unrestrained
Movement

I begin to realize that my face will never be inside of your face
And that we can silently communicate using a series of microscopic
Gestures

And we will understand that the phrase 'alone together' is not an
Oxymoron anymore

And I will resolve to never be happy enough to forgive you
And I promise that from now on I will only have emotions that can be
Perceived as neutral

I wonder how it is possible that there are billions of people in the world
Yet I am the only person on the planet

"I just need you to know exactly what I want without me having to say anything" (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

do you remember that dream I had
where my fingers touched your fingers
and we came to understand that our hands were capable of
expressing complex emotions as separate entities from our bodies
could you just put your mouth on my mouth next time you talk
I have been trained through operant conditioning
to react negatively to romantic emotional stimulus
now I feel comfort because your brain
is encased in a skull a few miles away from here
I'm sorry
saying words that have positive connotations
will cause catastrophic weather patterns
I am severely delusional and I have poor impulse control
it's fine, I'm good
now look at my face and tell me
that my physical presence in the world
has caused you to experience extreme disequilibrium
are you able to confirm my existence
in a strictly biological sense
wait, no
will you just hold on for one second
I have to hide under my bed for two years

"I will inevitably ruin our relationship" (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

you and I slept on a couch together
we were at a friend's house
I had consumed an indiscernible amount of alcohol
I remember you getting on the couch with me
I remember waking up and seeing that someone was next to me
and my head was in the space between his arm and his chest
I felt warm and dizzy
I adjusted my body and realized that it was you
my face was looking up at our face
I wasn't thinking about anything my perception of time
I had no idea how long I had been asleep
you started kissing me
I had this specific shitty feeling
I closed my eyes and thought about virtual particles
that cease to exist when they are not observed
the momentum of a virtual particle is uncertain according to the
uncertainty principle
it is also uncertain whether or not I existed while I was kissing you
you said 'do you want to have sex?'
I said 'no' and immediately felt guilty
our mouths were dry and smelled like alcohol
you grabbed me through my soft cotton shirt
we didn't pretend to feel aroused
you grabbing me does not affect the world in any way
in the morning you showed me cuts on your back
and told me that you had blacked out the night before

“when I die you can have my heart-shaped sunglasses” (from i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together)

I can feel your age
on top of me, looking down at me
sitting next to me and feeling calm
about this massive empty space

they told me that trust versus mistrust
is the primary psychological dilemma of early childhood

I was six years old when I observed you hugging me from a
conceptual distance
only later could I understand the permanency of rejection
'nobody's fault really'

I watched you fall through layers of fabric that day
I watched you speak in unintentional rhyme
and I allowed morbid details
to claim empty space in my head

do you remember that night
when I touched the bottom of the ocean with my tongue
when I felt inadequacy in my spinal column
and valued your quiet existence

now you can you understand
a person's hand pushing on my face
and his fingers in my mouth

"5 years old" (from *i will never be beautiful enough to be beautiful together*)

I wake up on a mattress in the living room
I ride a plastic tricycle in circles around the kitchen
until my mom wakes up
I eat cereal next to a window
in blue crayon, I draw a picture
of a woman walking her dog

I have come to understand certain things
that the slide in my backyard causes splinters
and there are dead crickets in the heating vents

he is embracing me
not a hug, not really
he is kneeling and I am standing
we are the same height this way

over his shoulder I can see marble stairs
I feel confused or afraid
he gives me a teddy bear

a year later, he will get married
at the wedding I throw petals down the aisle
wearing a handmade beige dress
with pin tucks around the collar

I leave the teddy bear in a park
I tell my mom I did it on purpose